

The True Measure

November 20, 2011

Matthew 25:31-46

I am amazed at the things that plastic surgeons can do these days.

If you need more luscious lips, they can inject collagen and make your lips downright pouty. If you would like higher looking cheekbones, you can get a tug here and a lift there and presto – cheekbones to rival Julia Roberts. If you wanted your derrière to be less wide, the plastic surgeons can slim it down. If you need just a bit more here or there, they can augment most parts of your body.

There was a body builder on a show I remember who thought that nature slighted him by giving him calves that were too skinny. Well, they put calf implants in his legs in order to make them shapelier! You name it, and they can make it, cut it out, lift it up, push it over, fill it in or tighten it up.

This show really got me thinking. Why would people want to go through the suffering involved in cosmetic surgery? The poor guy with the calf implants limped around for a month because of the pain. Recovery from some of the plastic surgery procedures is downright grueling.

Why would people endure all of that? It's obviously not always a matter of necessity. Most of the procedures are elective. Most of the people are not actors or actresses that depend on their looks to make a living. So why?

Some say vanity. But on the show I watched, some of the people interviewed seemed to doubt that they were OK the way they were. They thought that they didn't quite measure up.

Do you measure up? Kids who feel that they haven't met the expectations of their parents would answer, "no." If we feel that we don't quite fit in, not quite one of the crowd – we answer that question, "no!" If we think that our looks are substandard, we answer the question, "no."

Do you measure up? If we think that our wardrobes are not quite in fashion, the answer to the question is, "no." If we don't have the kind of job that we feel that we deserve, the answer is, "no." And the litany of not quite good enough – not measuring up - plagues many people for a lifetime.

Into this whole mix come Jesus' words recorded in our Gospel Lesson today. This can be another one of the most disconcerting texts in scripture. It leaves us wondering, "Do we measure up?" Am I one of the sheep or one of the goats?

As he has done in our readings for the last several Sundays, in this text Jesus speaks again about what will happen when the world as we know it ends. He speaks about a coming judgment – a judgment where the eternity of all people will be determine

He speaks about a time when all that we value: high cheekbones; shapely calves; pouty lips; designer wardrobes; fast-track career paths – won't mean anything. The only thing that will matter is: will I be on Jesus' left – a goat? Or will I be on Jesus' right – a sheep? Do I measure up?

And by the way, I'm sure there are no political implications in Jesus' use of goats on the left and sheep on the right!

The people to Jesus' left were shocked to learn that they had missed the boat. They didn't have a clue that they didn't measure up. They couldn't know because they never took the time to notice. They lived self-satisfied lives in the face of human suffering and need.

When Jesus said to them, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels," they were blown away. But why Lord? How can this be, Jesus?

But we find a surprising Jesus here. No longer the kindly servant who rode into Jerusalem on a donkey; no longer the suffering Messiah who died on the cross - but rather the Judge who says: "Depart from me – go into the eternal fires."

You lived only for yourselves. You never raised a finger for the needy. You had no compassion for the hungry and naked. Those languishing in prison never entered your minds. You've lived as if life was all about you - your contentment. When God came calling, you laughed. When it came time to serve others, you said things like, "I'm busy. I don't have time. I go to church, what more do you want? I gave money."

"But that doesn't cut it – that doesn't measure up," the Lord will say. How could you go on living that way - thinking – thinking that you were Christian? How can the love of Christ be in you while you choose to ignore the need of your brother or sister? Now, all of those words are not in scripture, but they are certainly consistent with what Jesus taught throughout his ministry.

At first blush, it appears that the basis for the judgment of Jesus was on how those on his left treated the poor. This passage is consistently misinterpreted and misapplied this way. But this is not the case.

People often twist this text to teach that Christians are to earn their way to heaven by serving the poor. It's comforting to think about it this way because it prescribes a formula. It suggests that you, on your own, can earn heaven. If you give to the poor, if you visit the sick, if you do this or that, then God will love you.

But that is dead wrong. You see, these kind deeds are evidence, evidence of what's in the heart. They are not a ticket to heaven. Deeds of kindness occur because people want to show the same kind of love and mercy that God has shown to them.

And so when Jesus says that those on his left will not enter heaven because of their lack of kindness to the poor, the sick and needy, he is really referring to their cold, dead, self-centered hearts. Lack of compassion is evidence that saving faith isn't present.

It's scary to think about the possibility that we might be in this group. It is scary because each and every one of us has neglected to do the good that we should have at one time or another. It is scary because we have passed by the person that was begging and we thought to ourselves, "Get a job, man." It is scary because we've all heard about a brother or sister that was sick, and we didn't even bother to call.

But listen to the words Jesus speaks to the sheep – to the people on his right: "Come, take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you." Now, again, if we're not careful, it would seem that Jesus is saying, "You will receive the kingdom because you visited those in prisons; you gave food to the hungry; you gave clothes to the needy; you tended to the sick."

But again, we have to remember that the Bible teaches that people can't earn their way to heaven. "By grace through faith," is how salvation comes. You see, even the sheep were surprised at Jesus' words. They asked Him, "Lord, when did we do these things for You? The sheep were not even aware that their acts of kindness honored Jesus. They didn't know that their faith measured up.

Well then, what is it? What's up with that, as they say today? I think, and I would offer to you, that the key to all of this is in verse 34. Jesus said to these folks, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father." The sheep inherit the Kingdom not because of what they've done. In fact, they really didn't measure up. They no more deserved the Kingdom than did the goats on Jesus' left. None of us does!

But because the sheep are blessed by the Father – heaven is theirs. We've discussed this quite a bit in our men's group on Monday mornings and in our Wednesday evening Bible study. We are conditioned, because of our parents, our experiences at school, at work and in society, that if we do good things we get rewarded and if we do bad things, we're punished in some way.

So most folks try to do good things, or at least keep from doing bad things, so we'll be rewarded or escape punishment.

But that's not how God works. God has offered forgiveness and salvation to everyone, and those with saving faith have grasped it! And it is from this blessing and the power of the in-dwelling Holy Spirit that the good deeds follow. These acts of charity and kindness are the evidence that we have saving faith. They are our response to what God has already done for us

The people on the right acted surprised when Jesus said, "you fed me, you did this for me." They asked, "When did we ever do that?" He said, "when you did it for the least of these you were really doing it for me."

Conrad was a cobbler who had a shoe shop in a tiny village in Europe. He dreamed that the Master (Jesus) would visit him at his little shoe shop. So early in the morning, Conrad got up early and swept, dusted, and got his little shop ready for the visit. He baked some bread and cakes, and he waited with great anticipation for the Master to show up.

As the day went by, Conrad saw an old man outside his shop window that had no shoes on his feet, out in the cold. Moved with compassion, he brought the elderly man inside to warm up and gave him shoes for his feet.

As Conrad continued to wait for the Master to come, he heard a knock at the door. With great excitement he ran to the door only to see a little old lady. She had a bundle of sticks and had not eaten in some time. At first, Conrad was mad because it was not the Master.

But then he was moved with compassion to bring her into the little shop and gave her something to eat, including the cakes and bread he had made for the Master. After she had finished eating, he carried her sticks for her to the edge of the village and hurried back in fear he'd miss the Master, but as he returned, the Master still was not there.

As the afternoon passed, Conrad waited. Still no Master appeared. And then there was another soft rap at the door. He thought surely this must be the master. It was a little boy. He asked Conrad to help him find his way home. Conrad didn't want to leave, but his compassion led him to help the little boy find his way home.

As fast as he could, he rushed back to the shop only to find it undisturbed. No Master to be found. Conrad cried in his heart, "Why is it, Lord, you delay? Did you forget this was the day?" Then in the soft stillness of the little shop, Conrad heard a voice, "Lift up your heart, For I have kept my word. Three times I came to your friendly door, three times my shadow was on your floor."

The Master came as the old man with no shoes, the hungry old lady, and the little lost boy. Jesus comes to us in those who do need help, are hurting, hungry, thirsty, lost, sick, or locked up in prison.

Friends, that's our calling. The Body of Christ is to reach out and help just like Conrad did.

Just after World War II as all the American servicemen were coming home, a sailor called his parents from San Diego. He said he was bringing a buddy home with him. "You see Mom," he said, "my friend is in pretty bad shape. He was severely wounded. He only has one arm, one leg, and one eye. So I thought he could come live with us."

After a few moments of silence the mother said, "Of course, let him come and stay a little while with us." But from the hesitancy in her voice the sailor realized they would not want to be burdened with a handicapped person for long.

Two days later the parents received a telegram that their son had jumped from a hotel window. When they received the body it had one arm, one leg, and one eye.

I think Jesus is letting us know in this passage that on the Day of Judgment there will be a group of people echoing what those parents must surely have said--"IF ONLY WE HAD KNOWN!"

"If only we had known that helping others was helping Jesus." "If only we had known that serving others was serving Christ." "How differently we would have lived our lives!"

Those on Jesus' right are surprised to learn that they've done so much to honor their Lord. They were not trying to work their way to heaven. They didn't have a clue that they measured up.

You see, sheep, as Jesus calls them, run on automatic pilot. God gives them forgiveness and faith. The Spirit living in them guides them to works of kindness and mercy. Because they're connected to the True Vine, Jesus Christ – they bear fruit.

Being kind doesn't require superhuman strength – just faith in Jesus. Doing good is not a burden or something that sheep get sick and tired of doing. They don't quit because they don't get honored or get their way. They don't get bored being kind.

When sheep aren't thanked, they keep right on serving. This is so, because you see, they don't do the works out of selfish ambition – it is Christ in them. It is Christ's love that drives them. It is Christ that fills them. And so, in the end, Jesus will call them and tell them: "Here, you blessed of my Father, stand at my right – enter into my Kingdom."

Jesus said, "You are mine... you do measure up... I made sure that you did. My death on the cross was for you, my beloved. My resurrection is yours. My Father has blessed you by giving you the faith to grasp it through his Word. And the Holy Spirit has changed you into sheep on automatic pilot – people who serve God and often don't even know it! You are blessed and you are mine."

"When you do it unto others, you do it unto me." May God forgive us when we lack vision and restore our sight so that we can see his presence in our world and in every human face.