

LITTLE THINGS COUNT

**Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Union Church of Pocantico Hills
November 22, 2020**

Psalm 100
Matthew 25:31-46

In this morning's text from Matthew Chapter 25, Jesus is summarizing what he has been teaching and preaching for three years. The time is getting short. The Cross is two days away, and he does not have much opportunity left to make things any plainer for his followers. As he often did, he folded it all up in one vivid, succinct, unambiguous parable that a child could understand.

He said that when the Son of man comes to judge the nations, he will separate them like a shepherd divides the sheep from the goats. And he will say to the sheep on his right hand,

I was hungry and you fed me,
I was thirsty and you gave me a drink,
I was homeless and you gave me a room,
I was shivering and you gave me clothes,
I was sick and you stopped to visit,
I was in prison and you came to me.

And the sheep will ask when they had seen him hungry, or thirsty, or homeless, or shivering, or sick, or in prison. And the King will answer, "I'm telling the solemn truth: Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me—you did it to me."

Then he will turn to the "goats" on his left, and say that he was hungry and they gave him no meal, thirsty and they gave him no drink, homeless and they gave him no bed, shivering and they gave him no clothes, sick and in prison, and they never visited. And the goats will ask when they had seen him hungry, thirsty, homeless, shivering, sick in prison. And he will reply, "Whenever you failed to do one of these things to someone who was being overlooked or ignored, that was me—you failed to do it to me." And he will send them away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.

The Last Judgment has fascinated, intrigued, and alarmed Christians since the earliest days of the faith. It has been used, of course, by centuries of preachers in the attempt to terrify folks into belief, dangling above their heads the prospect of an eternity of torment in the pit of fire, the lake of burning brimstone. That style of terrorist preaching has fallen out of favor, at least in our mainstream church. For as my old friend Barrie Shepherd used to say, "God wants us running toward him like lovers, not stampeded like a herd of terrified cattle."

And yet to this day, and despite the scientific revolution and all of our modern secularism and cynicism, there still seems to exist, among all kinds of people, the persuasion that somehow, someday, we will be called to account, we will have to answer

for those things we have done and left undone during our days here on earth. It was no less an atheist than the Secretary General of the Soviet Union, Leonid Brezhnev, who turned to President Jimmy Carter at the signing of SALT II treaty limiting nuclear arms some 40 years ago and commented:

“If we do not succeed, God will not forgive us.”

Yes, in literature, drama, the arts in general—certainly in popular humor, where entire volumes could be filled with all those jokes and cartoons set at the pearly gates—in our culture as well as in our scriptures, the idea of a Last Judgment seems deep rooted and abiding. What, then, can we say about it? Let me make three brief observations, not as definitive solutions; more as suggestions, things to start us thinking, reading, talking, even praying as we enter the season of Advent a week from now.

The first is this: don’t suppose we Christians are exempt. Oh, you know the party line—we’ve heard it many times before—that we are saved by grace, not by good deeds; and in the Great Tribunal we just have to claim the name of Christ, just need to know enough to play that trump card of Jesus’ death for us on the cross, to gain general admission, an EZ-Pass straight into heaven. Having studied the scriptures on this question, however, having read what Jesus, and Paul too, have to say, I am not at all convinced.

Paul, for example, states in many places that we are judged on the basis of our works. 2nd Corinthians 5, verse 10: “... for we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in the body.”

And Jesus too, on more than one occasion, but most clearly in that parable of the sheep and goats, Jesus makes clear that we are to be judged by God, not on the basis of whom we claim to believe in: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.”

We are to be judged on the basis of how we have responded to the actual needs, hurts, the deprivations and injustices of those around us: the little things count. “Come, O blessed of my Father,” Jesus tells those heaven bound sheep, “...inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, ...a stranger and you welcomed me... naked and you clothed me,...sick and... in prison and you came to me.”

No, it seems to me that “being saved by faith in Christ” has at least as much to do with the way we live in that faith, and live out that faith, as it does with what we tell ourselves and others we believe in.

In the second place let me suggest that the Christian Church and all its limbs and branches, the Church will have a lot to answer for on this Judgment Day. People sometimes tell me, when they find out I’m a pastor how they are turned off by organized religion, and I usually joke that if they prefer disorganized religion, they should join my church. But this charge, leveled more and more in our time, and by sincere people too much of the time, this charge can not be set aside so lightly.

Yes, of course, the church needs to be organized, has to become an institution if it is to achieve any good in this complex, global, institutionalized society of today. But why

is it that, so much of the time, the institution seems to get in the way of the church? Why is it that the Christian Church, while preaching the most wonderful ideas the world has ever known—self-giving love, service of others, and the like—why is it we always seem to get so caught up in preserving, defending, maintaining and expanding our institutions that we have little time or energy left for what Jesus called the weightier matters of the law.

Do you remember, by the way, who it was he said that to, to whom these remarks were addressed? Jesus was speaking to the Pharisees, the institutionalized religionists of his day. And these were good people, they gave their lives to building up their synagogue or temple. They were dedicated souls, eager to serve God above all else; and yet Jesus said to them: “You tithe mint, and dill and cumin, and neglect the weightier matters of the law, justice, mercy and faith...”

“It is ironical,” writes British physicist Paul Davies, in his fascinating book, *God and the New Physics*: “It is ironical that although most religions extol the virtues of love, peace and humility, it is all too often hatred, war and arrogance that characterize the history of the world's great religious organizations.”

Yes, the church, the institutional church, will have much to answer for in the Day of Judgment. And it behooves us, in the great denominations as well as in little, independent Union Church, to listen more openly to our critics, to listen to our Lord and his call to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the prisoners, liberate the oppressed, and then to make sure the institutions, the structures of our congregations and denominations, necessary as they may be, are there to serve the cause of Christ and not the other way around.

Finally, though, we need a word of hope; for if we are to be judged, and judged on the basis of these daily lives we live—I won't try to speak for you, but for myself, I must confess, my confidence is hardly brimming over. The one thing we can say, one hope we can cling to, is that we know who our judge will be. And the One who is to judge us is One not unacquainted with the stresses, strains, the turmoil and yes, temptations you and I undergo in daily living.

This is no remote, austere deity, like those Old Bailey judges we see on public television, in solemn wig and scarlet gown, enthroned on high, far removed from all the messy, grubby, incriminating business with which our days get so embroiled. Our judge has walked the dusty, sweaty streets as we have, has known the pangs of hunger, loneliness, abandonment and fear. Our judge has been, as the scriptures put it: “tempted in every way as we have, yet without sin.”

Yet that perfection did not lead to intolerance, to feeling himself superior to our stumbling ways. Rather it made him even more compassionate, ever more eager to welcome and forgive the sinners, failures, people like you and me, he met along the way. This is the One who is to be our judge on that great day of reckoning.

We judge ourselves—don't we?—for the most part. We see, all too clearly, our own failures, flaws, inadequacies, betrayals; and we condemn ourselves, even give up trying. We decide we are just too far gone ever to know redemption, ever to move again

toward new life, and we settle for this Hell of our own making—a Hell of separation from God, from one another, and from our own true selves.

And then the judge comes to us, takes off the wig and gown, climbs down from his almighty throne, walks in our midst this very morning and says to every one of us: “My child, sister, brother, why are you downcast and weary, why do you cling to your defeat, despair, your death? Come unto me all who labor and are heavy laden. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me. For my yoke is easy, my burden is light, and you will find rest, refreshment, renewal for your souls. Look up, my friend, look up to me and live!”

This, then, is our judge. This our faith and hope. This is the trust—not dread of Hell, but overflowing gratitude and hope—that can pick us up wherever we are, dust us off, and start us out again on the pilgrim’s way, the road of life that leads, yes leads to Judgment Day, and then beyond to life that never ends in Christ, in Christ who is our Judge; and our Redeemer.

We will be judged. We will be judged on how we live our days. Even the little things will count. And the One who judges is also One who saves. Beyond this, into all the divine arithmetic of merits and demerits, of mercy and of justice, we cannot go, we can only trust and leave our lives, our eternal lives in God’s own hands, God’s out-stretched, nail-pierced hands. We live by faith.

To the Lord our God, Alpha and Omega, be all glory and honor forever. Amen.