



**Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church**

**Asheville, North Carolina**

**22 November 2020**

**Sermon: "As the World..."**

**Rev. Samantha Gonzalez-Block**

**Matthew 25:31-46**

**MATTHEW 25:31-46**

*SGB: 25:31 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. 25:32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, 25:33 and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. 25:34 Then the king will say to those at his right hand,*

*RRC: 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 25:35 for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 25:36 I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'*

*SGB: 25:37 Then the righteous will answer him,*

*WJJ: 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? 25:38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 25:39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?'*

*SGB: 25:40 And the king will answer them,*

*RRC: 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'*

*SGB: 25:41 Then he will say to those at his left hand,*

*RRC: 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; 25:42 for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 25:43 I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.'*

*SGB: 25:44 Then they also will answer,*

*WJJ: 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?'*

*SGB: 25:45 Then he will answer them,*

*RRC: 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' 25:46 And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."*

*SGB: The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.*

~

Where were you when you first heard that song?  
That song that struck something deep inside.  
That song that surprised your emotions:  
making your eyes well up or your breath quicken,  
causing you to stop the car and take a moment.

I am talking about that daring song that spoke raw truth about the world:  
That opened your eyes to a reality that perhaps you had long ignored,  
or had been unable to see, or had hoped someone would have the courage to say.  
I wonder, what was it about that song that stirred something in you,  
or haunted you, or inspired you, or even changed you – just a bit?

I don't remember exactly *when* I first heard this song, but I know I was very young,  
and I do know *where* I was. Every night before going to sleep, my father would serenade my  
siblings and me with the guitar - and this song was one of our favorites. It sounded like a lullaby,  
the soothing strings, the repetitive verses...but the song is deceptive.

When I was old enough to really digest the words, I realized that this wasn't a lullaby at all.  
In my eyes, it was heartbreaking, illuminating poem about the vicious cycle of our society –  
obsessed with violence, with war, with winning, so much so, that time and time again,  
generation after generation, we continue to allow ourselves to be torn apart from each other,  
and we let our most vulnerable fall too quickly.

Perhaps you know this song. It was sung a lot in the 50s and 60s. It is called “Where Have all the  
Flowers Gone?” and I've asked Earl Fowler to share it with us this morning. As we listen, you  
are also welcome read or sing along, or if you feel so inspired, you are also invited to share the  
name of a song that has deeply impacted you in the chat section on youtube. Let's listen.

**(Video of Earl Fowler singing, “Where Have All the Flowers Gone?”)**

*Where have all the flowers gone? Long time passing.*

*Where have all the flowers gone? Long time ago.*

*Where have all the flowers gone? Young girls picked them every one.*

*When will they ever learn? When will they ever learn?*

*Where have all the young girls gone? Long time passing.  
Where have all the young girls gone? Long time ago.  
Where have all the young girls gone? Gone to young men every one.  
When will they ever learn? When will they ever learn?*

*Where have all the young men gone? Long time passing.  
Where have all the young men gone? Long time ago.  
Where have all the young men gone? Gone to soldiers every one.  
When will they ever learn? When will they ever learn?*

*Where have all the soldiers gone? Long time passing.  
Where have all the soldiers gone? Long time ago.  
Where have all the soldiers gone? Gone to graveyards every one.  
When will they ever learn? When will they ever learn?*

*Where have all the graveyards gone? Long time passing.  
Where have all the graveyards gone? Long time ago.  
Where have all the graveyards gone? Gone to flowers every one.  
When will we ever learn? When will we ever learn?*

~  
*When will we ever learn?*

For the past 10 weeks, we have been diving into our theme: “As the World Turns.”  
We have been wrestling with God’s Word,  
while taking a hard look at our society and ourselves:  
wondering how our faith refocuses our eyes,  
demands for something more, pushes us to live anew.  
And in the midst of this grinding, good work,  
we have had to grapple with a world that is still stuck in the same cycles of oppression...  
An election season that can’t seem to quit.  
A virus that is on the rise (but still many won’t take it seriously).  
A racist society that refuses to look in the mirror and shift once and for all,  
An antiquated system that allows the most vulnerable to tread water,  
while the most privileged float safely at the top.

Dare I say, our thanksgiving tables *must* be sparser this year, in part  
because we as a society have not been able to stop this cycle that we are stuck in.  
We have not really learned how to work together and face hard truths,  
to release ourselves from the bonds of selfishness, scarcity and impatience,  
to believe experts and welcome viable solutions,  
to be and see Christ among us - as the world, dot, dot, dot.

*On this Christ the King Sunday,  
we wonder, what will it finally take for all of us to heed Christ’s call to alter cycles and systems  
of injustice, and construct a more loving, life-giving world – here and now?*

~

Jesus and his followers knew much about dwelling in a society caught up in cycles of violence, mistrust and abusive power. To be Jewish in the ancient world, meant to be members of the oppressed minority: accustomed to being taken advantage of by the empire, powerless to change the status quo, left to do whatever they could to keep their heads down and survive.

What should continue to amaze us is that God *chose* to be born into this position. She could have come into this world as a noble king or wealthy landowner, but instead God *chose* to inhabit a body pushed to margins - a body willing to be sacrificed in order to transform the world.

Now, in our Matthean text this morning, we encounter Jesus towards the end of his life. His ministry is in full swing (he is sharing parables and modeling radical generosity) and soon, he will be betrayed, arrested and crucified.

In this particular moment, we find him speaking to his disciples about the day when the Son of Man will come in glory to separate the righteous from the wicked.

Jesus says: “All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.”

Now, our text uses the words sheep to speak about the faithful and goats to refer to those who are accursed. But before we jump to any conclusions about Jesus’ good or ill feelings towards certain animals, we must remember that Jesus’s audience was made up of mostly fishermen and farmers. Therefore, sheep and goats were most likely relatable metaphors for his listeners.

Another notable controversy are the words: “All the nations” or “*panta ta ethnē*” in Greek. Scholars have argued that “all the nations” might not mean *everyone*, but rather it refers specifically to non-Jews (much like the Hebrew word ‘*goyim*’), or even more exclusively to folks who are not Jewish and not Jesus followers (meaning, anyone who doesn’t believe Christ is King).

This interpretation does seem possible. Our Gospel writer, Matthew was living in the midst of tense times, where Jesus followers were facing fierce persecution, and Jews and Jewish Jesus followers were becoming ever-more divided. To be a “Christian” at the time was to be one of “least of these.” Therefore, this text could in fact be a desperate plea, aimed at all those who do not follow Christ to treat those who do, with loving-kindness and respect.

This may be so, but many other scholars argue that if we interpret this text in this very focused way, we may be letting ourselves off the hook too quickly. If this call to live and love anew has nothing to do with us as Christians, we may then close our eyes to our modern privilege and to the unjust systems we participate and benefit from. We might see ourselves as the victims in our society, unwilling to reach out to those who suffer most.

Therefore, if we instead interpret “all the nations” as “all people, everywhere”, we cannot point a finger at anyone but ourselves. And “the least of these,” then refers to the most vulnerable in our

world (religion aside). This second interpretation becomes a collective calling for us to open our eyes to brokenness and pain, and open our hands to healing and reform.

~  
“*What have you done for [human]kind today?*”

Every night at the dinner table, Ben Ferencz would ask his children this same question: “*What have you done for [human]kind today?*” It seems like a lot of pressure, and a big question to have to answer while chewing on steak and potatoes. But, for Ben it was the only question that really mattered. And a simple answer would do.

As a young lawyer, Ben had been selected to serve as Chief Prosecutor for the world-famous Nuremberg Trials. Never having tried a case before, Ben was given the monumental task, of prosecuting top Nazi officials for the atrocities they had committed across Europe. These officials had tortured and murdered millions of Jews, as well as gypsies, differently-abled persons, members of the LGBTQ community, and anyone else who was deemed a threat to the Third Reich. Their excuse: they were just following orders; they were just doing what the system demanded of them.

Ben Ferencz, who was a first generation Jewish-American, could have been one of the millions murdered, if his family had not fled Europe years earlier. Now, at the tender age of 27, he was standing atop a pile of books so that he could be tall enough to see over the lectern at the trial. There, he offered remarks heard around the world, remarks that would forever change international criminal law.

He remembered “I was calm. I was determined. I didn’t realize I would be making history.”

His opening words were piercing and poetic: “It is with sorrow and with hope that we hear the stories of the murders of millions. This was the tragic fulfillment of a program of intolerance and arrogance. Vengeance is not our goal, nor do we seek merely a just retribution. We ask this court to affirm by international penal action man’s right to live in peace and dignity, regardless of his race and creed. The case we present is a plea of humanity to law.”<sup>i</sup>

Ben Ferencz’s remarks in many ways introduced human rights and crimes against humanity to the international legal stage. His experience instilled in him a fire to speak out for the most vulnerable and help progress the world – in small and mighty ways – towards greater tolerance and justice. From then on, in Ben’s eyes, the simplest acts of kindness towards another could be deemed an essential piece of *tikkun olam* (the repairing of our broken world).

“*What have you done for [human]kind today?*”

Here in our country, we know that we participate in white supremacist systems: systems that benefits the privileged and harms the vulnerable – especially black, brown and indigenous bodied people. When we feel safe, we stay silent, we go with the flow, we let the cycles of violence and injustice continue. On top of this, this season of pandemic, can blind us

and paralyze us all the more. From the safety of our homes, with doors closed, we may be feeling especially overwhelmed and unable to make any measurable impact.

But just as Ben Ferencz challenged his children each night to stay engaged,  
Jesus calls us into creative, bold discipleship – always...even now.

Christ says: “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”

Jesus’ words are not a “sheep and goats” metaphor, they are a daring song, a literal call to action:  
*Feed the hungry, tend to the sick, visit the prisoner...  
Wear a mask, call a neighbor who is lonesome, believe a victim, stay engaged with the church...*

Just as songs tell stories, Jesus’ words tell the story of a God who seeks to bring us out of our cycles of complacency and blindness, and pushes us to use whatever resources we have: our talents, our voices, our presence, our God-given strength, our prayers, our humor, our hands, in order to reach out to the “least of these” – to those who are hurting most. This is what matters to Jesus. It is the heart of his ministry, of his very being. And it is our urgent calling.

No matter what is going on in our world, there is always *something* we can do to disrupt the violence, to tend to the hurting, to shift the status quo, to pierce a hole, so that God’s love can push through.

*I wonder... during this thanksgiving week, how can you extend God’s love?*

As Christians, we have a tendency to fall back on God’s grace,  
to let our faith in Christ be enough to carry us through the difficult seasons of life,  
but Matthew’s text challenges and inspires us to let our faith be what lifts us out of our seats.  
Not so that one day we can be rewarded when Christ enters into the world,  
but rather so that we can recognize Christ in every face we meet – here and now.

Jesus says: 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

Friends, to be Christian is to be *in* the world:  
to recognize its rough edges,  
to call out systems of oppression,  
to be at the forefront of healing and transformation.

To be Christian is to *see* Christ at the center:  
to recognize Jesus in every person,  
to lift up the most vulnerable,  
to embody radical love each and every day.

~

When I was a little girl, my father sang a song to me that opened my eyes to something broken in our society. And as my partner, Matt and I prepare to welcome our own child into the world, I know that this will be a song that we will want to sing to our little one. Perhaps if we can shed more light on the hard truths about our society, we can all begin to understand our part in repairing it.

Siblings in Christ, as the world turns, unlearns, churns, returns, spurns, discerns, learns, yearns, burns, upturns, dot, dot, dot, we know that there is much work ahead of us. Unjust cycles are hard to break, especially when we benefit from them. It is easy to stay silent and keep our eyes shut.

But Christ, our unlikely King continues to call us all out, and pushes us to get to work. May we have the creativity to build a kingdom of truth and thanksgiving. May we have the courage to hold our society accountable. May we have the faith to harmonize a new song with God. And may we dare to do all we can - with all we have - to change the world for the better.

~

*(Video of Andrea and Marta Rosal singing “If I Had A Hammer”)*

*If I had a hammer, I'd hammer in the morning,  
I'd hammer in the evening, all over this land*

*I'd hammer out danger, I'd hammer out a warning,  
I'd hammer out love between my brothers and my sisters all over this land.*

*If I had a bell, I'd ring it in the morning,  
I'd ring it in the evening, all over this land*

*I'd ring out danger, I'd ring out a warning,  
I'd ring out love between my brothers and my sisters all over this land*

*If I had a song, I'd sing it in the morning,  
I'd sing it in the evening all over this world  
I'd sing out danger, I'd sing out a warning  
I'd sing out love between my brothers and my sisters all over this land*

*I got a hammer, and I've got a bell, and I've got a song to sing all over this land  
It's the hammer of justice, it's the bell of freedom,  
it's the song about love between my brothers and my sisters all over this land.*

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<sup>i</sup> *Prosecuting Evil*. Directed by Barry Avrich. Melbar Entertainment Group, 2018.