“Lord, Where Did We See You…?”

Matthew 25:31-46

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Have you ever had one of those experiences where you see a historical location in person and all of a sudden, the event associated with the location just becomes a little more *real* to you?

For example, I had that experience when I moved to Staunton and took a different route down to Durham one day and found myself driving past exits for Appomattox Court House. Appomattox had been a word that I’d known for a while and I knew vaguely somewhere in the recesses of my mind that it was where Lee surrendered to Grant but it had always existed in my head as kind of an imaginary location. Big events like the ending of the Civil War can’t be located just off the highway...can they? But as I passed the exit and the historical markers I thought to myself, “Whoa...That’s a real place.”

When I moved to Memphis in the summer of 2015, I had another one of those experiences of seeing history come alive. I had grown up learning about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in school and we’d studied some of his writings in seminary. And somewhere in my head, I *knew* he’d been killed in Memphis...but when I found myself walking down Main Street in Memphis and seeing the Lorraine Motel, where King was assassinated, and seeing the “I Am a Man” mural depicting the striking sanitation workers for whom King had traveled to Memphis that fateful week in April of 1968, when I saw those landmarks, the events that I had only known distantly became more real.

One of my favorite traditions at the church where I worked occurred every year  during the staff meeting after the Martin Luther King, Jr., weekend. Our head of staff would gather all 30+ of us in the conference room and invite anyone who was in Memphis on April 4, 1968 to share about that day.

It was always interesting to hear the stories. One of my favorite stories came from Mimi, one of our administrative assistants, who told the story about how her husband fell off of a slide that afternoon and broke his arm and how they had been stopped by the National Guard on the way to and from the hospital due to the city-wide curfew. Mimi also remembered that afternoon for herself in great detail - she remembered the friend with whom she walked home from school, the color of her dress that day, and that when she arrived home, her mother had the TV on, which was highly unusual at 3:15 in her house.

And then some of the staff who were African American began to share their experiences from that day and there was always a stark contrast. While many of the white citizens of Memphis experienced confusion, fear, and some inconvenience that day, the African American citizens shared experiences of fear and confusion, and also deep, deep grief, dismay, and even feelings of defeat as they wondered if this meant the movement would end.

Upon hearing their stories of what happened on April 4, 1968 and the weeks, months, and honestly years to come, an event and a person who had just been kind of larger-than-life became more real for me. I began to appreciate Dr. King and his legacy for the real things that he said and did. And as a result of my time in Memphis, I think I feel a stronger urgency than I did before to examine King’s mission and message and see where I might find myself playing a part.

Sometimes there are moments where an idea or an event becomes less abstract and more real, more urgent.

In today’s text from Matthew 25, the kingdom of heaven becomes more real and less abstract for those who are on the receiving end of Jesus’s lesson.  Today’s portion of Matthew 25 comes at the end of a long series of lessons from Jesus and whereas the first few chunks of Matthew 25 are told in comparisons, this last chunk of verses differs from the other sections before it.

In the first section, Jesus tells a parable comparing the kingdom of heaven to ten bridesmaids who didn’t save up their oil to wait for the bridegroom. He uses the comparison word “like” as in...this isn’t *exactly*what the kingdom of heaven will be like; it is only a comparison. Further on in the second section, Jesus continues to describe the kingdom of heaven using comparison language, saying, “For it is as if a man…” and then he continues with another parable, describing the landowner and his servants and the talents the landowner gives the servants.

But then in this final section, Jesus drops all comparisons and tells the people gathered to hear what *will* happen when the Son of Man comes in his glory to usher in the kingdom of heaven. No more “it is like” or “it is as if” but now, “this is what will happen and you need to see where you will land and it is 100% based on where your heart is and what you are doing with your life right now.” This section is the very last of Jesus’s teachings in the entire gospel of Matthew and as one commentary writer puts it, “Surely, he must have saved the most important for last.”

In this moment, Jesus has taken the teachings about loving God and loving neighbor as yourself and has made them a little less abstract and a little more real. It’s not enough to say that you love God, neighbor, and self, but *have you actually done it?*

Jesus takes their concerns about what will happen later on and brings them back to what is happening right now. Jesus essentially tells them, “It’s fine to look toward the coming of the kingdom of heaven, but what you are doing right now is just as important and what you are doing right now is how you prepare.”

As Christians, some of us may be in the habit of only looking at what happens in the next life and not thinking so much about our call to love God here and now. And Jesus makes it pretty clear: By showing love to others right here and right now, you are showing love to me. And that is what is most important.

In his famous “I Have Been to the Mountaintop” speech delivered one day before his death, Dr. King addressed a crowd at the Church of God headquarters in Memphis. He talked about the people’s desire to stay up on the mountaintop when they’ve had these revelatory experiences, to stay removed from the pains of this world in the hopes that they can stay up top with God. Instead, he said that the people needed to come down from the mountaintop and bring God’s love to the people.

He wrote, “It's alright to talk about long white robes over yonder, in all of its symbolism. But ultimately people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here! It's all right to talk about ‘streets flowing with milk and honey,’ but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here, and his children who can't eat three square meals a day.

It's all right to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day, God's preacher must talk about the new New York, the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles, the new Memphis, Tennessee. This is what we have to do.”

King calls us to live into a duality of hope for the future, but doing the hard work of loving God’s people here, today.  He calls us to take these visions of God’s bright love and shine a light in the darkness today.  One commentary writer described this going to-and-fro from the mountaintop to the places of suffering as a “movement from vision to witness, from glory to suffering, suffering to vision, and back again.”[[1]](https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vTNz2GrxYEf-hKKAN1oTNDhpO7JAxao4HM_rSHawpAc4G4NJOzjU0vs6sjDn9y9dgKVlFu6GwQR5ORO/pub#ftnt1)

That’s what we’ve been called to do ever since Christ spoke those words in Matthew and that’s what we’re still called to do today, 54 years after Dr. King’s death - to move from witness to action. Because we know the love of God, we can’t help but share God’s love with others.

The text from Matthew asks the important question, “Lord, when did we see you…?”

When did we see you hungry and fed you? When did we see you thirsty and gave you something to drink? When did we see you as a stranger and welcomed you in? Or even worse….when did we see you and we ignored you?

In this text, Christ tells us that we have daily opportunities to serve God in love. We will have these opportunities every day, and it is up to us to respond, to say yes, to move from witness to action.

A few years ago, my sister shared an article with me with the headline, “City of Atlanta Pushes Homeless Population Out of City Parks for MLK Events.”

Talk about missing the point.  In arranging for a celebration of King’s life and legacy, the city that King had claimed as home for much of his life, had pushed out the very folks for whom King spent his life advocating.  Lord, when did we see you and we ignored you?

That’s the kind of question that I had hoped we would explore this weekend through our days of service. While we’re very disappointed that the snow is going to put a damper on our plans, we’re still very committed to doing the work. We are still committed to partner with the agencies in our area to fulfill our promises to them. Our hope for these next two days was to be able to say, “Lord, we saw you hungry and we fed you.  Lord, we saw you in prison and we visited you.  Lord, you were a stranger, and we welcomed you in” as we work toward building the new Staunton, the new Waynesboro, the new Augusta County.

We are still committed to that work. But until then, until we can venture back out into the world to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly, until then, while the snow falls, and we are all safe and snug inside our homes over the next couple of days, I want to offer something I’ve seen floating around the internet the past few weeks called “The Reverse St. Francis Prayer.”  May it help you as it has helped me reflect upon and reframe my purpose as a person of privilege and as a child of God in this broken and hurting world.

The Reverse St. Francis Prayer:

Lord, make me a channel of disturbance.

Where there is apathy, let me provoke;

Where there is compliance, let me bring questioning;

Where there is silence, may I be a voice.

Where there is too much comfort and too little action, grant disruption;

Where there are doors closed and hearts locked,

Grant the willingness to listen.

When laws dictate and pain is overlooked…

When tradition speaks louder than need…

Grant that I may seek rather to do justice than to talk about it;

Disturb us, O Lord.

To be with, as well as for, the alienated;

To love the unlovable as well as the lovely;

Lord, make me a channel of disturbance.

May it be so.

All praise be to God.

Amen.

[[1]](https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vTNz2GrxYEf-hKKAN1oTNDhpO7JAxao4HM_rSHawpAc4G4NJOzjU0vs6sjDn9y9dgKVlFu6GwQR5ORO/pub#ftnt_ref1) [https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/ive-been-mountaintop](https://www.google.com/url?q=https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/ive-been-mountaintop&sa=D&source=editors&ust=1643037507756646&usg=AOvVaw3HSG-ah7LW_Q-DXgZmIgof)