***IF I HAD ONLY KNOWN…***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

November 26, 2023

Texts: Daniel 7:13-14 and Matthew 25:31-46

In the late 1700s the manager of Baltimore’s largest hotel refused lodging to a man dressed like a hard-working farmer. He thought the fellow’s dirty appearance would discredit his inn. So the innkeeper turned him away. Later that evening, the innkeeper learned that the man he had turned away was Thomas Jefferson. Immediately he sent a messenger with a note asking Jefferson to come back and be his guest at the inn. Jefferson replied by instructing the messenger:

*Tell him I have already engaged a room. I value his good intentions highly, but if he has no place for a dirty American farmer, he has none for the vice- president of the United States.*

Upon receipt of Jefferson’s message, the innkeeper was heard to mutter, “It wasn’t my fault. I didn’t know it was Mr. Jefferson. If I had only known, I would have welcomed him gladly.”

Late one rainy night in the 1960s an older African-American woman stood at the side of an Alabama highway in the midst of a downpour. Her car had broken down, and she desperately needed a ride. Soaking wet, she tried to flag down a passing car. Several cars and a red pickup truck whizzed by before a young white man stopped to help, a rare event amid the racial tensions at the time in that part of Alabama. The man took the woman to a safe location where he helped her get assistance; then he put her into a taxicab to her final destination. She seemed to be in a hurry, but took time to write down his address and thank him. Seven days later there was a knock on the man’s door. To his surprise a huge color TV was delivered to his home with a note attached. He opened it and read:

*Thank you so much for assisting me on the highway the other night. The rain drenched not only my clothes, but also my spirits. Then you came along. Because of you, I was able to make it to my dying husband’s bedside just before he passed away. God bless you for helping me and unselfishly serving others. Sincerely, Mrs. Nat King Cole.*

Upon hearing the report of this story on the radio, a grizzled elder from First Church smacked the steering wheel of his red pickup truck and said to no one in particular, “Dang. If I had only known it was her, I’d have stopped and had myself a new TV!”

During his second month of college, a young student sat down to a pop quiz. He breezed through the questions until he came to the last one:

*What is the first name of the woman who cleans the school?*

The student read it twice and thought he must be mistaken. It had nothing to do with the class work. He had seen the cleaning woman in the hall several times. She was tall, dark-haired and in her late 50s, but he had no idea as to her name. He handed in the quiz, leaving the last question blank. As the class ended a student asked the professor if the last question would count toward their grade. “Absolutely,” said the professor. “In your careers you will meet many people. All are significant and deserve your attention and care, even if all you do is smile and say ‘Hello!’.” “If I had only known, I would have asked her name and nailed that quiz,” said the student to himself. The next day he asked. Her name was Dorothy.

While in the army, St. Martin of Tours was stationed near Amiens. One day, he and several of his soldier comrades headed out into the bitter cold, wearing their prized heavy cloaks to protect them from the frigid weather. As they approached the city gates, they met a beggar who was near naked and about to perish from the cold. As he looked at the poor trembling man, Martin was moved with compassion. He drew his sword and cut his cloak in two, giving one part to the beggar. His companions jeered and mocked him for his foolishness; he had given away his precious source of warmth to a total stranger. They would not let him forget such folly. That night Martin had a vision. He saw into the kingdom of heaven where Christ was surrounded by angels. Christ was wearing the cloak that Martin had given to the beggar, and Martin heard him say to the heavenly host, "Look, this is the cloak which Martin has given to me this day."[[1]](#endnote-1) If we had only known, said his comrades, we too would have given our cloaks.

*“As you do to the least of these, so you do to me*,” says Jesus. “*And as you fail to do for the least of these* – for the poor man in the cold, the cleaning woman on the stairs, the rain-drenched woman by the side of the road, the dirty farmer looking for a place to rest his head – *as you fail to do for these, so you fail to do for me*.” There are a lot of deep theological doctrines with which to wrestle on our Christian journeys– the Trinity, the incarnation of Christ, the meaning of crucifixion and resurrection in God’s plan for salvation, the end of time – but these words of Jesus are not laden with deep mystery and veiled meaning. They are rooted in the very ground that we walk day to day – the tiled halls of schools, the carpeted waiting rooms of offices, the sidewalks of Staunton – all those places where we encounter the least of these who are our brothers and sisters, the poor and the poor in spirit, the homeless and the hopeless, those in need and those who need us. In serving them we serve Christ, in loving them we love Christ. In failing them, we fail Christ. Those who serve them are sheep of the divine flock, blessed with eternal life, and those who fail them are goats, driven out for eternal suffering, says Jesus. Lord, I want to be in that number when the sheep go marching in!

Jesus offers this illustration to the disciples gathered around him just days before his crucifixion. Perhaps to their surprise, this teaching about the sheep and the goats is not just about them, but about the “nations” gathered before the king. While there is some debate about whether “nations” refers to all people or just the Gentiles, what is clear is that it embraces far more than just the chosen people of Israel among whom Jesus taught and healed. Those Gentile sheep chosen from among the nations would enter the kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world – even though they had not known the king they unknowingly served.

For, note that the sheep were clueless about the impact of their actions. When the king commends them for their acts of compassion, they don’t pat themselves on the back. They ask, “When?” When did we see you hungry and give you food, or thirsty and give you a drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you or naked and give you clothing or in prison and visited you? The righteous are not just those who do the right thing, for as T. S. Eliot reminds us:

*The last temptation is the greatest treason:*

*To do the right deed for the wrong reason*.[[2]](#endnote-2)

The righteous are those who do the right thing for the right reason – out of love for a neighbor, out of compassion for those in need. They feed the hungry and clothe the naked and welcome the stranger and house the homeless and visit the prisoner, not to garner points on a divine scoreboard, but simply to live faithfully day to day. It is their faithfulness that is rewarded, faithfulness that springs from a way of life that Jesus embodied and urged upon all his disciples.

Many of us might be content to have Jesus’ teaching end right there – with the sheep commended for their compassionate actions. It is a feel-good story, like the beatitudes in Matthew that enumerate only blessings. But like the beatitudes in Luke that have both blessings and woes, so Jesus’ teaching in this passage does not stop with the feel-good blessing of the sheep. It goes on to the goats.

When Jesus calls the goats accursed for failing to meet his needs, they ask the same question of the king that the sheep asked: when did we see you hungry or thirsty or naked or in prison and fail to serve you? Rooted in their question is an excuse for their actions. If we had only known it was you who was hungry, Lord, we would have fed you. If we had had only known it was you who needed clothes we would have offered you the shirts off our backs. If we had only known it was you who was the illegal immigrant, we would have welcomed you. If we had only known it was you, we would have done differently. Jesus’ point is that it really doesn’t matter that you did not know, for in serving our anonymous neighbors in need we serve him, and we dare not think that we can distinguish which is Christ and which is not. We are called simply to recognize the need and to respond with grace, mercy, and love. To do anything less is to fail the Son of Man who comes in glory.

We have decided to be a Matthew 25 congregation, which means we have committed to join other Presbyterian congregations in embracing that spirit of selfless service and love in our life together that Jesus commended to his disciples. We have committed to following the example of the sheep! While the foci of our commitments are addressing issues of congregational vitality, systemic poverty, and structural racism, we embrace Jesus’ call more broadly. Matthew 25 is not a program to follow, but a way of life to embrace; it is not a list of things to do, but a way of being disciples that permeates our lives and our life together. And living that way can be freeing. As Cynthia Rigby notes:

*The reason I want to stand with the sheep is not so much because they beat out the goats as because they just seem so God-honest free. They don’t seem to be burdened by carrying around a list of what they believe, and what they have done (and for whom), and what their position is on x, y, and z issues (however important x, y, and z issues are). They seem to be living out their faith in a considerably less tense and clenchy sort of way.*[[3]](#endnote-3)

That is how we are called to live – freely and lovingly which is to say faithfully! We can’t help everyone, for we have limited resources – limited time, limited finances, limited energy. We can’t give a handout to every beggar on the street, give a ride to every hitchhiker we see, send our gifts to every organization that helps a starving child, or say “yes” to every agency asking for a few minutes of our time. But we can open our eyes and ears to the needs of those around us and look for ways to be of help day to day, one person at a time. For, in serving them we serve Christ. And lest you think you can be excused for your failure to serve by saying, “If I had only known it was you, Lord, I would have done more,” don’t bother. For Jesus says, “As you do it to the least of these, you do it for me.” And now you know!! Amen

1. David Adam, Cry of the Deer, telling the story of St. Martin of Tours cited in The Search for Compassion, Andrew Purves, pp. 128-129 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. T.S. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) pt. I [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Cynthia Rigby, *Holding Faith*, Abingdon Press:2018, p.251 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)