

ACROSS THE WORLD
ACROSS THE STREET
AROUND THE CORNER

A SURVEY OF MATTHEW 25: 31-46

WELCOMING THE STRANGER ENCOUNTERING JESUS IN THE POOR

Poverty is the widowed woman struggling to feed an orphaned grandchild in Malawi or South Africa. It is the child abducted from home to fight in an insurgent army in Uganda or Myanmar. It is the politician in Central America or Eastern Europe trying to balance budgets for hospitals or schools in a faltering and debt-laden economy. It is the citizen paralyzed by a culture of endemic corruption, disabled by pollution, trapped in working practices that undermine family and stable community - and this last is not restricted to the poorer countries of the world. So it is also the modern Western person cut off from the depths of religious and cultural meaning by a series of relentless messages about consumer gratification.

Rowan Williams
Christianity, Islam and the Challenge of Poverty
Virtueonline
The Voice of Global Orthodox Anglicanism, 2005

We are called to find Christ in the poor, to lend our voice to their causes, but also to be their friends, to listen to them, to speak for them, and to embrace the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them.

Joy of the Gospel #198

“If somebody cares about you, it’s possible that you’ll care about others. ‘You are special, and so is your neighbor’ – that part is essential: that you’re not the only special person in the world. The person you happen to be with at that moment is loved, too.”

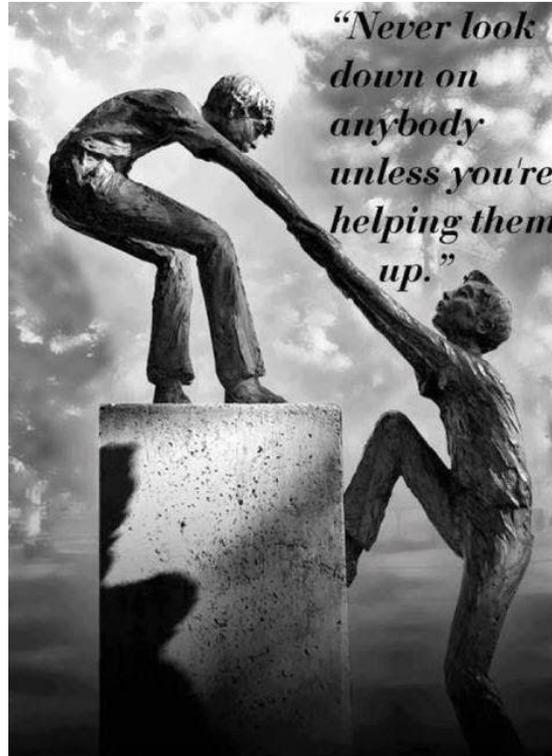
Mr. Rogers

MATTHEW 5: 14-16

14 “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. 15 No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

**COME TO ME, ALL YOU WHO ARE WEARY AND FIND LIFE BURDENSOME,
AND I WILL REFRESH YOU.**

Matthew 11: 28



'Come, you that are blessed by my God, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵for 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, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'

Matthew 25: 34-36

**I worry about the Children of the World
I wonder why the greedy and powerful fear the Children
In the interest of weapons, they take bread from the mouths of Children
Why are we so nourished by violence?
Why do we not fear hunger?
The Children must be fed well with bread and love
Nourished with welcome
Clothed with love and care
Healed with embraces
And ever so sheltered in the home of our heart**

THE CORE TEXT

MATTHEW 25: 31-46

THE "END-TIME" JUDGMENT THE WORKS OF MERCY

³¹ "When the (Child of Humanity) comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. 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, ³³ and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

³⁴ Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 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, 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.'

³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' ⁴⁰ And the king will answer them, '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.'

⁴¹ Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴² for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 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.'

⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, '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?'

⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these (my family, my brothers), you did not do it to me.'

⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

THE EVANGELICAL DISCOURSE - 5:1-7:29
THE ETHICAL BASIS FOR MATTHEW 25: 31-46

This Discourse is incredibly rich. It is almost impossible to summarize in any easy outline. Jesus as the 'prophet like Moses' ascends a mountain as his disciples gather around him to learn and receive his word. Jesus has just experienced a multitude of people. We suppose that those people were afflicted and struggling. Consequently, he must be teaching his disciples to be kind and generous to others, especially those who are hurting. I wonder, however, if Jesus may not have been comforting his disciples who are now poor, hungry, hurting, and persecuted because they are striving to respond to Jesus. Disciples of Jesus enter upon a difficult road. They are not preachers of a simple repentance that leads to a 'Spirit-filled' church but travel a road of persecution since they proclaim love and hope to those the world damns. (see the severe verses in Matthew 10:32-42).

Let us now locate in this first Discourse what might be Matthew's (or Jesus') fundamental understanding of this strong message of universal love and forgiveness (without repentance).

*For I tell you, if your uprightness
does not surpass that of the scribes
and Pharisees, you will never get
into the kingdom of Heaven.*

Matthew 5:20

The balance and reasonableness of Leviticus 19:15 is completely thrown off balance by this astonishing statement of Jesus. Disciples of Jesus are to exceed the norms of morality and live a life, which points to an exceeding justice. In a word, they are to remind others of what it is that God himself would do - SEE 5:48!

Jesus is not protesting a society in which there is excessive regulation or law. He is not demanding that people, in general, be moral. The call to exceeding righteousness is a call to be perfect in the mercy God shows to all. Perfection in the Scripture means wholeness, completeness. God's love is not something other than what God is. God's love expressed to the sinner is found in an unbounded and unconditional mercy.

*“You have heard that it was said,
'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'
But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,
so that you may be children of your Father in heaven;
for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good,
and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.
For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?
Do not even the tax collectors do the same?
And if you greet only your brothers and sisters,
what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?*

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect (See also Luke 6: 27).

Matthew 5: 43-48

There is nothing in Leviticus commanding Hatred of anyone. However, there is much in the human experience, which gives every indication that hatred, especially of a real or perceived enemy, is actually the norm. There is present in our land today a self-righteousness that is violent, spiteful, and actually hateful. What is more than alarming about this terrible development is its presence even among so-called religious people. Popular preachers are blessed by political bodies, which engage in acts of injustice against the poor. The inner-city poor person is blamed for deficits caused by corporate greed, bureaucratic corruption, and political irresponsibility. Only a minority in the organized religions heeds the faint call of leaders to rise up in the cause of true justice. Few may actually label their intention hate but their deeds reveal more than their attempted labels. The fact is hate has almost become some inverted natural law.

One translation of Matthew 5:48 reads, "You must therefore set no bounds to your love, just as your heavenly Father sets none to his." This call to unbounded love not only blesses the enemy but liberates the disciple of Jesus to be motivated by freedom. Jesus provides the antidote to hate and much more. No longer do disciples need to be limited by their anger or fear. Our love for the enemy does not suggest we agree with any immoral or criminal behavior. Our love recognizes the other as a child of God. Our willingness to see the other as our brother or sister sets us free from any compulsion to hate.

The "love of enemy" extends the Golden Rule to its logical conclusion. Note the teaching of Jesus points out that the human person, created in the image and likeness of God, has the capacity to be like unto God in the ordinary affairs of life. Here we encounter the Gospel of empowerment.

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If we choose the path of the heart, then of course our focus is ultimately and always on love. Love is the cornerstone of many of the world's religions, especially the mystic paths. Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav used to say that achieving the simplicity of love is one of the highest enlightenments. The attainment of true loving-kindness is the cornerstone of Jewish practice. Often this comes easily; the sluice of the heart is opened and the water flows. But some of the gates of the heart are closed, and these can be opened only through a strong spiritual practice.

Davis, Avram
The Way of Flame
Harper, 1996
p. 48

CONSIDER:

PITTSBURGH THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY – JANUARY 15, 2020

LOOKING FOR MISTER ROGERS

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Mister Rogers' City

Recently, I was able to visit the "Tribute to Children" on a cool, beautiful fall afternoon. As I walked along the river, the bronze statue of Fred Rogers shone in the sunshine, a beacon overlooking the city he loved. The sculpture itself, set high upon an observation platform created from the remaining piece of the old Manchester Bridge, is framed by the pier's repurposed architecture. Mister Rogers appears as though he were still on television. I climbed the stairs onto the platform and heard the voice of Rogers himself, in the form of piped-in snippets of monologue and song from his program. At first, I found it jarring to listen to a recording down by the riverside, but then, settling in, I came to appreciate his voice, which was calming for me after a hectic week at the Seminary. Robert Berks' sculpture, dated 2006, is made in the sculptor's typical style: flat pieces of material layered over and adjacent to one another to create a likeness that is not smooth and idealized, but is as messy and accessible as a real human life. In it, Rogers is sitting, one leg crossed over the other, as he finishes changing his shoes. It is as though he were welcoming me into the opening frames of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* and comforting me in times of trouble.

Yet the monument offers more than comfort. It provides an implied social critique of the status quo, just as Fred Rogers' whole life did. The monument of this mild-mannered man sits on the Allegheny River, near to the anchored *USS Requin*, a Trench-class military submarine named for the French word for shark. All around the "Tribute to Children" in North Shore Riverfront Park are military memorials to the veterans of various wars, including World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. Nearby are both Heinz Field, where the Steelers play football, and PNC Park, where the Pirates hit baseballs. Statues of famous athletes line sidewalks. The streets next to the park are filled with bars and saloons, hamburger and beer joints, steak houses and flashy commercial establishments meant to entertain, amuse, and distract us. Amongst all of these testaments to the violence, competitiveness, and divisiveness of our way of life, the statue of this kindly man in his sweater and sneakers sings out from the north side of the river, helping us to imagine a city of neighborhoods where people are considerate and compassionate, where bridges connect us to each other and deepen our relationships, and where our creativity and intellect are employed in the interest of helping others and improving our social and political engagements. For Fred Rogers, this was not only an imagined way of life, but one he lived and urged us to live as well. I realized that it is up to us to unfold lives of wholeness that Rogers embodied, to create the kind of world to which he dedicated his whole life, to be the Fred Rogers that we want to find. ...

Shan Overton is the director of Pittsburgh Seminary's [Center for Writing and Learning Support](#).

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CONCLUSION:

Jesus clearly teaches that the law of love (God and neighbor) controls or guides the proper interpretation of the Law/Torah. He appeals to the traditional teaching of Leviticus

19:18. This rather clear teaching on the guiding force of love has been expanded by his teachings on forgiveness and reconciliation.

As Bornkamm has observed, Matthew has elevated The commandment of love to the position of a canon for interpreting the Torah as a whole. Whether, and to what extent, this represents the replacement of the Torah with a nova lex is open to discussion, but in any case, the relationship between the commandment of love and the rest of the Torah in Matthew's view differs from anything in the rabbinic tradition... As Hummel has said, the rabbis were interested in summary statements for pedagogical purposes, but Matthew has made this summary statement a norm and source for halakah (practice).

**The Law that Hangs
Donaldson, Terence L.
The Catholic Biblical Quarterly
Vol. 57, No. 4/ October, 1995, p.64**

I would find it difficult to believe that Matthew would lose this perspective of the norm of love in of Matthew's Gospel the so-called apocalyptic judgment scenes of the final Discourse. This Gospel has typically reversed the expectations. The outsiders are invited into the community. The invitation is freely given since disciples of Jesus give to others what they themselves have freely received. The death of Jesus is the sign and definition of the reality of Gospel love. Matthew has already been quite severe in the demand of the disciples to be a person of reconciliation and forgiveness. There is nothing in the final Fifth Discourse to suggest any watering down of the centrality of love in the teachings of Jesus.

***In truth I say to you, in so far as
you did this to the least, you did
it to me.***

Matthew 25:40

The so-called 'Last Judgment' in Matthew 25:31-46 is unique to this Gospel. It has often been interpreted to teach the realities of heaven and hell. I have argued that such realities are not really present in this episode. Some see the judgment of God in rather simplistic terms. God rewards the good and punishes the wicked. If this is the central teaching of this section of the Gospel, then, I fail to understand what is original or important to Jesus. Retribution is no more than a typical and quite traditional way in which to view religion.

Jesus clearly taught that to follow him meant to embrace the cross. The road is difficult because the disciples and we are called to proclaim in practical deeds a Reign of Heaven open to all especially the sinner and outsider. The disciples of Jesus are held to severe judgment as to how they act in this troubled world.

The afflicted in this parable have often been seen as those to whom the disciples have been sent. They are called to be the presence and action of Jesus to the poor and broken. In this sense, the parable supported a social interpretation of the Gospel. Real love and faith are truly expressed in our good deeds to the broken. Faith needs to be active.

In another paper, I have suggested that the apocalyptic judgment scenes are mere backdrops, the canvas, on which the Evangelist paints the surprising truth that Christ is present in the afflicted. To see them is to see Jesus.

For our purposes here, we can synthesize various aspects of these various approaches. Yes, the poor and the afflicted in this parable are the disciples of forgiveness who have suffered much to bring reconciliation in the midst of conflict. Yes, Jesus identifies with them so much that to help a suffering disciple is to help Jesus himself! As the disciples, in the First Discourse, are called 'poor in spirit' and 'humble of heart' so now they are addressed as 'those who were hungry, naked, and imprisoned.'

From the perspective of Christians who retell this parable today, the sufferings borne by the least of the brothers and sisters of the Son of man summon the church to be an authentic and faithful witness of the gospel and serve as a warning against what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace," grace without conversion and engagement in the scandal of the cross. Christian churches cannot preach acts of loving kindness to the hungry, the thirsty, the imprisoned, and the naked unless they too are churches in mission which bear these same sufferings. No gospel is harsher than Matthew on an ethics of words without deeds. No gospel is more eloquent on the dialectic of concealment and revelation, of weakness and power. The church proposes to the nations must be an ethics to which the church gives living witness in the midst of the nations.

The Gospel in Parable
Donahue, John R.
Fortress, 1988, p.125

²¹"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,'
will enter the kingdom of heaven,
but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

Matthew 7: 21

"To make an option for the poor," Gutierrez writes, "is to make an option for Jesus."

That ultimately is the spiritual basis for our solidarity with the poor. We opt to be with Jesus, to serve Jesus, to accompany Jesus among the world's poor in the nonviolent struggle for justice.

John Dear SJ
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