

The Good Common to Us All (Matthew 25: 31-46)

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A Southern Baptist pastor and a queer UCC minister open the gospel in search of common ground. It sounds like the opening of one of those “so and so walk into a bar” jokes, doesn’t it? Except the Baptist wouldn’t be caught dead in a bar—and I should know. He’s my dad.

Yes, a few months ago Pastor Willard McPherson of Piney Forest Baptist Church in Chadbourn, NC, agreed to a Bible study with this dyed in the wool liberal safely ensconced in this little blue bubble of Chapel Hill.

Dad and I often chuckle at the thought of which of us would be kicked out of the others’ pulpit first. And, both being semi-closeted Pentecostals, we’ve made a wager on who’d get the most uncomfortable looks from the pews for praying in tongues during a service.

I won’t test you today, United Church, but just know I’ve got a lot riding on this. And with the positive vaccine news this week, I’m increasingly optimistic that we’ll have these pews full again next year. So get ready.

It’s important to keep a good sense of humor about these things, we’ve found, because (as you can imagine) my father and I have some pretty serious disagreements. In fact, much of what separates us is a microcosm of our national divides. Divides which became so deeply ingrained in our minds as we awaited election results and obsessed over various projections of red and blue maps. As I’ve read through various opinion pieces and analyses of the election, the major takeaway seems to be: “America is divided.”

The journalist and editor of Vox (V-O-X, not F-O-X) makes this point in his timely and unsettling new book *Why We’re Polarized*, which was published this year prior to the election. He focuses a lot on the politics of identity—in its broadest sense—the various ways that we sort ourselves in U.S. society. Urban vs. rural. Liberal vs. conservative. Religious vs. nonreligious.

Over the last few decades, Klein argues, these divisions are increasingly stacked on top of one another. What were various polarizations and scattered fractures in American life are becoming neatly sorted into two, increasingly insular camps. It’s Cracker Barrel vs. Whole Foods. Prius vs. Pickup. These seemingly innocuous identity markers map ever-seamlessly onto our growing political divides.

Superficial as these differences may seem at first glance, the values divide they represent is deep. Even with a shared calling, gathered around a shared text, my father and I are often worlds apart in how we assess its ethical import. In fact, we often have to take many steps back just to explain how we’re approaching a passage before we can share our interpretation of it. Over the course of several weeks now we’ve only managed to get through 4 chapters.

Together we’ve set off in search of what we have in common, despite the distance between us. And I’m not going to lie, I’ve often stopped and wondered if it’s even worth pursuing. Shared civic and ethical values have been rather difficult to uncover, and the frustrations that emerge in the process are profoundly unsettling. And that’s between a father and child who deeply love one another.

But even in our most ardent disagreements, we have found that the spaciousness of prayer *and* within the text itself can help us make room for one another. When we bring our concerns to God. When we ask our questions of Jesus rather than point fingers at one another. The Spirit draws our focus from the rather serious things that divide us and offers some small glimpse into what we might hold in common.

And for all our disagreements, my father and I do share a deep love of the gospel, and it's in the gospel we've begun to uncover the possibility of some shared civic purpose.

You see the gospel holds the urgency of our concerns, the seriousness of our disagreements and questions, with pastoral tenderness. Just as Jesus so often did with his disciples.

As we see in parables like the Good Samaritan, or in even in the apocalyptic discourse in the chapter prior to today's text, Jesus is able to hold the urgency of the disciples' questions while pointing them back to the possibility of the Kingdom here and now. "What must we do to inherit eternal life?" they asked him . . . or "Tell us . . . what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"

And Jesus knew the sincerity of these questions. He was intimately familiar with the debates on resurrection and the afterlife within the Jewish communities of his day. Christ took these questions seriously and saw them as animating concerns for his followers, who would often pose them in intimate spaces as a follow up to his public teachings.

These questions were humble acknowledgements of Jesus' authority. He was the teacher, they knew, who could put their minds at ease about what was behind the veil of death. He was the one who could tell them the mysterious conclusion of time's forward march—the grand finale of earth itself.

And this was no mere intellectual exercise for the disciples. Theirs was a sincere desire to align themselves "on the right side of history," as we might say today. Their concerns were animated not just by the security of knowing what was to come, but in their aspiration to do what is right in the sight of God. In Matthew's gospel, for example, the disciples share the author's preoccupation with righteousness.

And as if to honor the seriousness of their concerns, the Matthean Jesus places today's passage at the very end of his teachings. This scene of judgement is, in fact, the culmination of Christ's public message for Matthew's Gospel. An answer to the questions carried so closely and shared so vulnerably with Jesus by his disciples.

And yet for all the tenderness I perceive in the context of this passage, it can be a difficult one to read. Jesus doesn't mince words here. There is, in fact, a sharp and eternal distinction laid out between the nations. Sheep vs. Goats. Right hand vs. left. Eternal life vs. eternal punishment. It's not exactly a comforting image, all things considered.

We really wrestled with this passage in this week's Wednesday morning Bible study. Because it's difficult to reconcile this God of judgment with the loving Creator so many of us have come to embrace. And it's hard to square these words of Jesus with the ones we encountered even in last year's Reign of Christ Sunday—those of a crucified Jesus in Luke 23 who offered forgiveness to those who persecuted him and welcomed a guilty criminal into paradise.

How could a Good God proclaim both judgment and mercy? Offer salvation and threaten division? These were the serious concerns that emerged for our Bible study this week. Adding to our list of urgent questions to take to Jesus.

Now far be it from me to solve the paradox of grace this morning.

But as I've leaned on Jesus' wisdom in this passage, and seen this text as a pastoral response to the disciples' earnest questions, I think I may see a way forward. Not just through this theological puzzle but through the concerns I brought to the gospel with my father as well.

For Jesus has a sly way of using the eternal to hold a mirror up to our world as it is. Jarring as this image of judgment may be, it ultimately directs the disciples subtly away from the existential fears they brought to him and back to the practical application of the kingdom in their lives here and now.

In the Bible study with my father, and in the Bible study with many of you, I have brought to Jesus my questions of deepest concern: “How do we respond faithfully to the urgency of injustice *and* hold the long arc of history?”

“How do we seek a path back to one another across these deeply moral chasms?”

My father and I have come to the gospel, to Jesus, in desperate search of what shared values we might uncover. In search of good news. And to our surprise, what we’ve discovered here, at the heart of Christ’s teachings, is the possibility of the common good.

Yes, you heard me, the common good. And not the stuff of some morally anemic, namby-pamby, public radio puff piece. But a truly robust civic virtue.

Here in Matthew 25, in this culmination of his teaching, Christ offers us a path back to one another. A path to the very kingdom the disciples sought—the one we still seek today.

He meets our deepest longings for shared hope and eternal assurance with a single animating civic concern: **Whatever is counted good news among the “least of these” is the good common to us all.**

Whatever feeds the hungry, gives drink to the thirsty, welcomes the stranger, clothes the naked, cares for the sick, offers presence and liberation to those who are imprisoned—these ethical considerations are of eternal consequence.

These are kingdom-centric actions. These are the values we as Christ’s followers share. This is the culmination of Christ’s gospel. The good news he came to proclaim. The evidence of his reign among us here and now.

This common good, church, is our animating civic concern. This is the gospel we must proclaim to the world not just in word but in deed. For we won’t find the common good in the halls of power but among those counted least significant in our society. We seek God’s face and Christ’s kingdom there.

Now, my father and I are still wrestling with what this means in terms of policy. But though we cannot yet imagine what the end of this journey together looks like, the gospel has gently turned our attention back this messy, hopeful possibility of the kingdom here and now.

In his pastoral attentiveness to our most vexing questions, Jesus draws our attention to the most pressing needs of those among us. Those with whom Christ identifies most—the least of these. To seek him, we must see them. To hear his voice, we must listen to their cries. To serve him, the Christ who reigns, we must address their needs.

To seek his kingdom, to pursue the eternal good, we must look around us, open our hearts and our hands—and get to work. It may be that we find the answers we seek on this journey. It may be that we find a path back to one another.

I, for one, am ready to find out. Let’s get to work.