Sunday, March 4, 1984
GOOD AND BAD SURPRISES
Matthew 25:31-46

Beginning with the Old and New Testaments of the Bible and throughout the history of the Christian church and the Jewish faith from which Christianity was born, there has been the idea of some kind of divine judgment. At times this concept of divine judgment has taken some very explicit forms.

For example, there have been those who have expected Christ to return any day soon and have confidently waited for that return. I remember one man that I knew who was filled to overflowing with his dire predictions of the end of the world. Each morning he would come out of the house, look up at the sky, and say almost joyfully, “This could be the judgment day.” When asked what would happen if it were, he would reply, “The saints will be caught up in glory, and the rest will be thrown into a sea of fire.” And of course, he was certain that he would be numbered among the saints.

Others have thought of divine judgment not so much as one particular day on which all people will be judged, but rather as the conviction that we live in a moral world and that “what we sow we will also reap,” as the New Testament puts it. Another way of saying this is that throughout life we human beings are faced with choices, and we can choose to do good or choose to do evil, and that consequences follow from those choices.

Biblical scholars have noted that initially the idea of diving judgment as presented in the Bible was associated with the punishment that came on those who disobeyed God. It was a day of judgment for Adam and Eve when they were discovered in disobedience by God and expelled from the Garden of Eden. It was a day of judgment for Cain when he killed his brother and was sent to roam the earth.

Later in the Old Testament, the prophets regarded historical events like the destruction of the city, the temple, the execution of a king, and the deportation of the people into exile as days of judgment. In other words, historical crises which determined the fate of nations were religiously interpreted as judgments in face, judgments of God pronounced at definite times and places in history. Judgment occurred over and over again.

Later on, the notion of divine judgment was transformed in its concept to one great judgment day the end of the world with God being on the judgment throne pronouncing doom upon governments, individuals, and nations. The book of Daniel in the Old Testament, for example, is filled with descriptions of such a judgment day, as is the book of Revelation in the New Testament. No longer is it something that happens to people in history. It is actually the Last Day, the day when the whole of creation moves into a new phase of meaning. Then begins the golden age on earth and in heaven.

So again, remember these two points: 1) the idea of some form of divine judgment and a day of judgment is an essential part of the Jewish heritage from which Christianity came, and 2) the Christian notions of divine judgment generally have fallen into these same two categories, namely, the judgment is a fact encountered in daily life, or that there will be some kind of final day at the end of history when all will be brought before the judgment seat of God.

In addition to these ideas, Jesus always emphasized two other points concerning divine judgment — first, that no one knows exactly when or how divine judgment will take place; thus, he cautioned his disciples to be prepared and, at the same time, not to dwell too much on trying to figure out any time or place, but rather to go about one's business. And the second point which Jesus always emphasized about God's judgment, whenever and however it might take place, is that there are going to be surprises, some good and some bad. The parable of diving judgment we are looking at this morning especially makes this point, as we shall see.

Let's now look at this parable of judgment, or, as it is sometimes called, the parable of the sheep and the goats. It is much more than a parable of judgment. No other piece of Jesus' recorded teaching expresses so eloquently and beautifully the ethical spirit of both Judaism and the Christian faith.

The parable makes three main points, and all contain the element of surprise.

1. The first point can be summed up in the phrase, "The way we treat people is the way we treat God." And in this parable the emphasis is on the way we treat the kind of people who are usually forgotten by most of society — those who lack the basic necessities of life that most of us take for granted: food, drink, clothing, and shelter; those who are lonely, such as the strangers in our midst, which would also include those who are different from the majority and therefore are often excluded because of our biases and prejudices; the sick, which include the elderly who are in nursing homes; and those in prison for whatever reason. These are the real outcasts in our society, truly the forgotten.

Thus, said Jesus, when we are kind and hospitable to such forgotten people, we are being kind and hospitable to God. "Inasmuch as you did it unto one of the least of these who are my brothers and sisters, you did it unto me." The way we treat people, particularly the forgotten and the outcasts of society, is the way we treat God. Service of God and service of other human beings cannot be separated.

Notice especially how the element of surprise and astonishment already enters in. By what criteria does God judge us? Surprise! God doesn't first ask us what we believe, or if we go to the right church or synagogue. God doesn't care if we belong to the United Church of Christ or the United Presbyterian Church or the United Methodist Church or the Roman Catholic Church, a particular kind of Lutheran church, or any other church, or if we were baptized by immersion or in some other way. God wants to know: what have you done with the forgotten people in your neighborhood or nation? What about the lonely person where you work? What about the person who is never included at school? What about the people you dislike? Have you visited the local jail? Or do you think such people are better forgotten?

2. The second main point of the parable is this: some people discover that, although they have not known it, they have been on God's side, have been doing God's work and God's will all the time. Surprise! Some people are religious in the best sense of the word without knowing it.

The fact is, the truly righteous are always surprised. "Who? Me? I haven't done anything special!" They are surprised that anyone would even notice their deeds or call them good.

In the parable, God says to them, "Come, O blessed, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." In other words, "Come, here is your well-deserved reward," because God says, "When I was hungry, you gave me food; when I was thirsty, you gave me

something to drink; when I was a stranger, you welcomed me; when I was sick, you visited me; when I was naked, you clothed me; when I was in prison, you visited me."

They are surprised, and they ask, "When did we ever meet you, God?" And the equally surprising answer, "As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it unto me."

There are some people (may their number increase) who just go about helping anyone in need simply because that is the right thing to do. In an old novel, Miriam's Schooling, we meet a person called Mrs. Joll, who is unpleasant, unkempt, quarrelsome, but whose redeeming quality is this: she comes instantly to the help of anyone — stranger or neighbor — in his or her illness or need. The novelist says of her she has done "the one thing which, if ever there is to be a Judgment Day, will put her on the right hand, numbered among the sheep and not the goats; when all sorts of scientific people, religious people, students of poetry, people with exquisite emotions, will go to the left and be damned everlastingly."

Certainly, the parable makes it clear that to be good means to be good to someone, to be good for something. And the truly good people are not even aware that they are doing good.

3. The third main point of the parable is this: There are some people who are going to be surprised in a bad way. They had always thought of themselves as religious. They were sure they had the right belief, the right theology, belonged to the right church, were numbered among the elect. Thus, they are surprised when God says to them, "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." And they can't believe it. "Why?" they ask. "What did we do to deserve that judgment, that sentence?"

And according to the parable, God answers, "It's what you didn't do that has condemned you. I was hungry and you gave me no food; I was thirsty, and you gave me nothing to drink; I was a stranger, and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me."

"But how could that happen?" they ask in surprise. "When did we see you hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or sick, or in prison?" These people had always only thought of God as being found in safe places. They never thought of God as being present in the social outcasts of their society. They never thought of God as being present in the problems of society.

Whatever in the world would God be doing among the divorced, the handicapped, the poor, the minorities, the employed, the abused children or abused women or men? Whatever in the world would God be doing among homosexuals or alcoholics or mentally disturbed people? "We're sorry we missed you, God, or neglected you, but we didn't think you'd be in such places. We expected to find you only among the righteous, only among the beautiful people, only among our kind of people and in our kind of church."

In the Old Testament, the prophet Jonah had the same problem. He was surprised that God would be interested in the corrupt people of Nineveh.

Or perhaps these people who had missed God were simply waiting for a bigger and more sensational way to serve God. After all, there's nothing very exciting about feeding the hungry or clothing the naked or visiting those in jail. We expect to find and serve God in the big events, where the action is. Surely when we meet God, there will be a blinding light, or at least some kind of overwhelming experience. But maybe not!

Some of you will remember the story of the shoe cobbler and his guest. This elderly shoemaker was loved and honored by the people in his village. In fact, they often called him “Father Martin.”

One evening he said to himself, “If Jesus were born here in my town, I know what I would give him.” He rose from his stool and took from a shelf overhead two tiny shoes of softest snow white leather, with bright silver buckles. “I would give him these, my finest work.”

Replacing the shoes, he blew out the candles and went to bed. Hardly has he closed his eyes, when he heard a voice call his name: “Martin! Martin!” Intuitively he felt a presence. Then the voice spoke again: “Martin, you have wished to see me. Tomorrow I shall pass by your window. If you see me and bid me enter, I shall be your guest at your table.”

Father Martin did not sleep that night for joy, and before it was dawn, he rose and swept and tidied up his little shop. He spread fresh sand upon the floor. On the spotless, linen covered table he placed a loaf of white bread, a jar of honey, and a pitcher of milk, and over the fire he hung a pot of tea. Then he took up his patient vigil at the window.

Presently, he saw an old street sweeper pass by, blowing upon his thin, gnarled hands to warm them. “Poor fellow — he must be half frozen,” thought Martin. Opening the door, he called out to him, “Come in, my friend, and warm yourself and drink a cup of hot tea.” And the man gracefully accepted the invitation.

An hour passed, and Martin saw a young, miserably clothed woman carrying a baby. She paused wearily to rest in the shelter of his doorway. The heart of the old cobbler was touched. Quickly, he flung open the door. “Come in and warm yourself while you rest,” he said to her. “You do not look well.”

“I am going to the hospital. I hope they will take me in and my baby boy,” she explained. “My husband is at sea, and I am ill, without a penny.” “Poor child!” said Father Martin. “You must eat something while you are getting warm. No? Then let me give a cup of milk to the little one. What a bright, pretty little fellow he is! Why, you have put no shoes on him.” “I have no shoes for him,” said the mother sadly. “Then you shall have this lovely pair I finished yesterday,” and he took down from the shelf the solf little snow white shoes he had admired the evening before. And shortly after, the young mother left.

Martin resumed his place at the window. Hour after hour went by, and, although many people passed his window and many needy souls shared his hospitality, the expected guest did not appear. “It was only a dream,” he sighed with a heavy heart. “I did hope and believe, but he has not come.”

Suddenly, so it seemed to his weary eyes, a vision appeared, and he saw again before him, one by one, the poor street sweeper, the sick mother and her child, and the other people he had aided during the day. And each smiled at him and said, “Have you not seen me? Did I not sit at your table?” Then they vanished. And then he heard the words, “For I was hungry, and you gave me food; I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink; I was a stranger, and you took me in. Inasmuch as you have done it to one of the least of these who are my brothers and sisters, you have done it unto me.” Amen.