Sunday, November 24, 1996
SURPRISED BY GOD
Matthew 25:31-46

In the Old and New Testaments of the Bible and in the history of the Jewish and Christian faith, there is the concept of divine judgment. At times, this doctrine of divine judgment has taken some very explicit forms.

For example, there have been those in the past and in the present who have announced a particular date and time when God's judgment of each one of us will begin, and they have confidently waited for that to happen because they are sure they are among God's elect.

I personally knew one man who continually predicted that the end of the world, followed by God's judgment of each one of us, was going to take place very soon. Each morning he would come out of his house, look up at the sky, and say joyfully, "This could be the judgment day." When asked by someone what would take place if it were, he would reply, "The saved will be caught up in glory, and the rest will burn in hell." He was certain that he was among the saved.

Others have defined God's judgment not so much as one particular day on which all people will stand before God's judgment seat, 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. Throughout our lives, we are faced with choices, and we can choose to do good or to do evil. We can follow God's will or go against God's will, and good or bad consequences naturally follow from those choices. Furthermore, because we live in an interconnected world, your good or bad choices and mine always affect others, for good or for ill.

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

Later in the Old Testament, the prophets regarded historical events such as the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple and the deportation of the Hebrew people into exile as days of judgment. In other words, historical crises that determined the fate of nations were religiously interpreted as judgments of God pronounced at definite times and places in history.

Still later, the notion of divine judgment was transformed into the concept of one great judgment day at the end of the world, with God pronouncing judgment, both good and bad, upon nations, groups, and individuals. 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 end of history as we know it — the day when the whole creation comes to an end and moves into a new phase of meaning.

Remember these two points: 1) The concept 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) Christian notions of divine judgment generally have fallen into these same two categories — namely, that judgment is a fact encountered in daily life, and that there will be some form of final judgment day at the end of history.

In addition, Jesus emphasized two other points concerning divine judgment: first, that no one knows exactly when or how God's final judgment will take place. Thus, he cautioned his followers to be prepared, and at the same time, not to dwell too much on trying to figure out any specific time or place, but rather to go about one's business faithfully.

The second point Jesus always emphasized about God's judgment, whenever and however it might take place, is that there are going to be surprises, both good and bad.

The parable we are considering as the basis for this sermon especially makes this point.

Sometimes it's called the parable of the sheep and the goats, and although it speaks of God's judgment, it has some other themes as well. No other piece of Jesus' recorded teaching expresses so eloquently and beautifully the essence of our Christian faith and life.

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

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

Thus, said Jesus, when you are kind and hospitable to people, especially in these categories, you are being kind and hospitable to God. "Inasmuch as you did it unto the least of these who are my brothers and sisters, you did it unto me." The way you treat people, especially the forgotten and the outcasts of society, is the way you treat God. Love of God and love of other human beings cannot be separated.

Notice especially how the element of surprise enters in. By what criteria does God judge us? Surprise! God doesn't first ask us what we believe or if we know precise theological formulations. God doesn't ask if we go to the right church or synagogue. God doesn't care if we belong to the United Church of Christ, the Presbyterian, the United Methodist, Roman Catholic, Baptist, or a certain brand of Lutheran church. God doesn't care if you were baptized by immersion as an adult or sprinkled as a baby. Baptism in this parable is not mentioned at all. Yet all these people who have been kind and served the less fortunate are welcomed into God's joyous presence.

God wants to know: What have you done with the forgotten people in your neighborhood, town, 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? What about the person on death row in prison? Have you ever visited the local jail, or do you think that such people are better forgotten?

The second main point of the parable is this: Some people discover to their surprise that they have been doing God's work all along, they have been on God's side and following God's will, and they didn't know it. Surprise! Some people are religious in the best sense of the word without being aware of it.

The fact is, the truly good people among us are always surprised. “Who? Me? I haven’t done anything special.” They do good naturally and are surprised that anyone would even notice their good deeds or call them good, and they are embarrassed if their goodness is publicized.

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, “Welcome into God’s loving presence. Even though you never expected a reward for your goodness, it’s yours forever. 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 came to me.” They are surprised and ask, “When, God, did we ever meet you?” And they receive the equally surprising answer, “As you did it to one of the least of these, my sisters and brothers, you did it unto me.”

There are people — may their number increase — who simply and humbly go about doing good, never expecting any reward. They do it because it is the right thing to do.

In an old novel, Miriam’s Schooling, we meet a person called Mrs. Joll, who is unpleasant, unkempt, and quarrelsome, but whose redeeming quality is this: she comes instantly to the help of anyone — stranger or neighbor — in his or her need. The novelist says of her, “She has done the one thing which, if there is ever a judgment day, will put her on the right hand of God, numbered among the sheep and not the goats, when all sorts of other people, especially those who consider themselves religious, well-educated, and privileged, 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, and especially to the losers — to be good for something. And the truly good people are not even aware that they are good.

The third main point of the parable of the sheep and the goats is that there are other people who are going to be surprised in a way they had least expected. These are individuals who had always thought they were the most religious and deserved special rewards from God.

They were sure they had the right beliefs, were baptized in the correct way, belonged to the only true church, and were numbered among the elect. Thus, they are surprised when God says to them, “Depart from me, 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 not what you did that has condemned you, it’s what you didn’t do. 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.” They ask in surprise, “When did we see you hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or sick, or in prison? We’ve been in all the right places and never saw you in any of those conditions. Furthermore, you’re God, and you could never be hungry or thirsty, or need anything.”

These people had always thought of God as being found in safe places where everything was all right. They never imagined that God would be present in the outcasts and problems of their society.

Whatever in the world would God be doing among the divorced, the handicapped, the poor, the persecuted, the unemployed, the abused children, the abused spouse, those who have AIDS, the alcoholics, the homeless, the drug addicts, and the mentally unbalanced?

“We’re sorry we missed you, God, or neglected you, but we had no idea you’d be found in such places. We expected to find you only among the righteous, the so-called beautiful people, only among our kind and in our kind of church.”

Or maybe 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, clothing the naked, or visiting those in jail. We expect to find and serve God in the big events that make the headlines, where we can be properly honored for our good works.

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

One evening he said to himself, “If Jesus were born here in this town, I know what I would give him.” He rose from his stool and took from a shelf overhead two tiny shoes of the 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 had 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 will pass by your window. If you see me and bid me enter, I shall be your guest at your table.”

Martin could not sleep that night. He got up early and cleaned his little shop. That evening, he placed on the table a clean linen cloth, a loaf of bread, a jar of honey, and a pitcher of milk, and over the fire, he hung a pot of tea.

Soon, 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 his door, he called out, “Come in, my friend, and warm yourself, and drink a cup of hot tea.” And the man gratefully 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. Quickly, he opened 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 and my baby,” she explained. “My husband is at sea, and I am ill without a penny.” “Poor child,” said Martin, “You must eat something while you are getting warm. Let me give some warm milk to your child. Have you no shoes for him?” “No,” said the mother sadly. “Then he shall have this lovely pair I finished yesterday.” Martin took them from the shelf — the soft white shoes he had admired the evening before. And shortly thereafter, the young mother with her child left.

Martin resumed his place at the window. Hour after hour went by, and although many people passed by and many needy souls received his hospitality, the expected guest did not appear. “It was only a dream,” he sighed. “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 he heard the words, “For I was hungry, and you gave me food; I was thirsty, and you gave me 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 sisters and brothers, you have done it unto me.” Amen.