Sunday, November 21, 1999
THERE WILL BE SOME SURPRISES
Matthew 25:31-45

The element of surprise is a major theme in the Bible and in the life and teachings of Jesus. Here are some examples. “The first shall be last and the last first.” “Not everyone who calls me Lord will enter God’s realm.” “Blessed are the meek, the humble, for they will inherit the earth.” “I have many sheep who are not of this fold.” “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.'” “All who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” Jesus also described the Spirit of God as being like the wind, one never knows where and when it will blow.

In the Bible and especially in the teachings of Jesus, the theme of surprise is often connected with the concept of God’s judgment. The thinking about God’s judgment has frequently been associated with the world as we know it coming to an end. Throughout the history of the Christian church, there has been a lot of discussion about if and when the world as we know it might end. There have been those who have set specific dates and have always been wrong. I personally knew one man who continually predicted that the end of the world, followed by God’s judgment on each one of us, was going to take place very soon. Each morning he would come out of his home, look up at the sky, and say joyfully, “This could be the final 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 of you will burn in hell.” He was certain that he was among the saved. He forgot that Jesus said, “But about that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven.” Now as we approach December 31, 1999, predictions abound. There are those who are sure we are about to experience God’s final judgment.

In the history of Christian doctrine, there has always been another understanding of God’s judgment. It has been defined as not being one particular day on which all people will stand before God, or even the day that we die, 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 says.

Throughout our lives, we are faced with choice and we can choose to do good or evil. We can follow God’s will or go against God’s will and good or bad consequences naturally flow from those choices, sometimes not always immediately but eventually. Furthermore, because we live in an interconnected world, your good or bad choices always affect others for good or for ill.

The concept of judgment and the element of surprise are among the major themes in the parable of the sheep and the goats which was read earlier. The story underscores four main points and all are related to the themes of judgment and surprise.

The first point can be summed up in the familiar phrase, “The way we treat people is the way we treat God.” In this story, 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. A second category of forgotten people, and who are sometimes hated, is composed of 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 excluded because of our fear and our prejudices; the sick, which includes the elderly who are in nursing homes; and those in prison for whatever reason. These can be the forgotten and shunned 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 me and to God. “Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these 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 the correct and precise theological formulations. God doesn’t ask us if we go to the right church or synagogue. God doesn’t care if we belong to the United Church of Christ, or the Presbyterian, or United Methodist, or Roman Catholic, or Baptist, or Lutheran Church. God doesn’t care if you were baptized by immersion as an adult or sprinkled as a baby. Baptism in this story 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 only to know what you have done with the forgotten people in your neighborhood or town or country. What about the lonely person at work? What about the individual who is never included in school, but who is always teased and made fun of? What about the people you dislike? What about the person on death row in prison? Have you ever visited someone in jail, or prayed for them, or do you think such people are better hidden away and forgotten?

The second main point in this story of judgment and surprise is related to this first one. Some people discover to their amazement that they have been doing God’s work all along. They have been on God’s side and following God’s will and didn’t know it. Surprise! There are people who are religious in the best sense of the word without being aware of it. They didn’t do their good works in an attempt to earn God’s approval. They were not seeking to earn any kind of reward.

The fact is that 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 are embarrassed if their goodness is discovered and 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 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, “God, when did we ever meet you?” And they receive 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 people, and may their number increase, who simply and humbly go about doing good never expecting any reward and they do it because it is the right thing to do.

In an old novel, Miriam’s Schooling, we meet a person named Mrs. Jolt, 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 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 eternally.”

Certainly, the parable makes it clear that to be good means to be good to someone and especially to the forgotten in our midst. And the truly good people are not even aware they are good.

The third main point in the story 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 that because they had the right beliefs, were baptized in the correct way, and belonged to the only true church that they were numbered among the elect. They are very surprised when God says to them, “Depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” They can’t believe it. “Why?” they ask. “What did we do to deserve that judgment?”

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.” “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? We’ve been in all the right places and never saw you in any of these conditions. Furthermore, you’re God and you could never be hungry or thirsty or in need of 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, the rejected, and the persecuted people among us. Whatever in the world would God be doing among the divorced, the poor, the homosexuals, the abused, those who have AIDS, the homeless, the drug addicts, and the mentally unbalanced?

“We’re sorry we missed you, God, or neglected you, but we had no idea that you’d be found in such places. We expected to find you among the righteous, the beautiful people, the most religious people, and others like us.”

Or maybe these people who had missed God among the rejected and the outcasts 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 which make the headlines, where we can be properly honored and praised for our good works.

All of this is connected to the fourth point of the story. Where is God to be found? Surprise! We discover and come to know God in everyday life, in serving others, especially the rejected and the forgotten. God is actually present in them.

All too often we make the mistake of thinking that God is in a separate compartment in the world, and so we speak of things as being either sacred or secular. But such is not the case.

Here's a little poem that's been helpful to me:

"The parish priest of austerity,
climbed up in a high church steeple,
to be nearer God, so that he
might hand God's word to the people.
When the sun was high, when the sun was low,
the good man sat unheeding
sublunary things, from transcendency
was he forever reading.

And now and again when he heard the creak
of the weather vane a-turning,
he closed his eyes and said, 'Of a truth
from God I now am learning.'

And in sermon script he daily wrote
what he thought was sent from heaven.
And he dropped this down on his people's heads,
two times one day in seven.

In his age, God said, 'Come down and die!'
And he cried out from the steeple,
'Where art thou God?'
And God replied, 'Down here among my people.'"

Do you want to truly find God? According to this story, the way to find God is through loving and serving others, especially those people who are the most forgotten and rejected among us. The revelation in this story is not about what it will be like to be in the presence of God at the end of time; rather, it is about the surprising blessing it is to live in God's presence in ministering to the hungry, the thirsty, and the forgotten in today's world. It's a story about finding the presence of Christ in other people in the here and now.

There's an old story about a monastery that was dying. In times past, people from all over the world came to the monastery for spiritual renewal. Now, however, the monks were older and more quarrelsome. They were worried that the monastery would die. Then they heard about a wise rabbi who lived as a hermit in a nearby forest. The monastery chose one of their number to go visit the rabbi and get his advice. The rabbi responded somewhat cryptically, "I cannot tell you what to do, but I can tell you a mystery: one of you is the Christ."

When the monk returned to the monastery and told the others, the place came alive with questions. "Certainly it must be Brother Michael," some said, "no one is more charitable than he." Then someone else would say, "Perhaps it is Brother Andrew, he is always compassionate and ready to listen." While they never solved the rabbi's mystery, life in the monastery changed. Because the monks always wondered which of them might be the Christ, the texture of the community's life became richer. Before long, the monastery was a place where others came to find renewal too. Amen.