Sunday, November 24, 2002
MEETING JESUS EVERY DAY
Matthew 25:31-46

One issue upon which Christians have had varied opinions for almost 2,000 years is whether or not there will be one final judgment day when every human being who has ever lived will stand before the "throne of God," and the wicked will be punished and the righteous rewarded.

A study of church history reveals that this question about a final judgment — how and when it will take place, and who will be saved and who will be punished — becomes a hot topic for discussion within every one-hundred or two-hundred-year time span. Then the issue quiets down again.

For some unknown reason, this issue rises and falls among Christians in the United States more than in any other country. Sometimes best-selling books add to the discussion and confusion. In 1970, Hal Lindsey wrote The Late Great Planet Earth. In present times, the Left Behind series has been very popular.

To add to the confusion, the Bible presents a number of different ideas on the subject of a "day of judgment." It does not speak with one voice. In the Old Testament, God is generally regarded as the judge of all the earth. For the most part, Old Testament writers expected God's judgment to occur in history, in the little histories of individuals and in the larger history of nations and the world, rather than in one final day of judgment. Judgment was primarily experienced in the here and now of everyday life for nations and individuals. Only a few passages hint that the righteous might hope for redemption beyond this life in this world and that the wicked might be destined for eternal punishment.

The New Testament also presents a number of ideas about God's judgment, and there are some hints of a possible final judgment at the end of the world. Many of these references are contained in the parables of Jesus. The parable we are considering today from Matthew's gospel is one example. There are two ways of interpreting this parable: as a metaphorical teaching story or as an actual description of what will happen someday.

There is also some evidence that the early followers of Jesus expected that he might return in a definable physical form during their lifetime and that he would then establish a new realm of God on earth. But it didn't happen. So the early church, and the church down through the years, has had to readjust its thinking. In the almost 2,000 years since then, as mentioned earlier, from time to time various individuals have predicted a final judgment day and even set exact dates and times, all of which have proved false.

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 house, look up at the sky, and say joyfully, "This could be the judgment day." If you asked him what would happen if today were the judgment day, he would reply, "The saved will be caught up in glory and the rest will burn in hell." He was always joyful because he was certain that he was among the saved and would not be left behind.

Whether or not you interpret this parable of the sheep and the goats metaphorically or as an actual description of what will happen on a final day of judgment, the crucial question is: what

does this story say to you about your day-to-day living as a follower of Jesus in the here and now?

The first two important points Jesus wants to emphasize in telling this story, and in many of his other teachings about God's judgment, are these: first, no one knows when, how, or if God's final judgment will take place. Thus, he cautioned his followers to be prepared and, at the same time, not to try to figure out when or how it might occur. Instead, they were to go about their daily work of loving God and neighbor faithfully. No other piece of Jesus' recorded teaching expresses so eloquently and beautifully the essence of Christian faith and life as described in this parable.

The second point Jesus emphasized over and over again in his teachings about God's judgment — whenever and however it is taking place or might take place in the future — is that God has many surprises.

There are three main themes in this parable. The first theme can be summed up in the phrase, "The way you treat people is the way you treat God." In this story, the emphasis is on how you treat 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, the strangers in our midst. This includes people who are different from the majority and are therefore often excluded because of our biases and prejudices; the sick, those in nursing homes, and those in prison for whatever reason.

Thus said Jesus, "When you are kind and hospitable to people, especially in these categories, you are being kind and hospitable to me. Inasmuch as you did it to the least of these my sisters and brothers, you did it to me." Do you want to meet Jesus every day? If so, you can find and meet him in such people.

Note how the element of surprise enters in. The people who treated the poor and the disadvantaged were surprised that they were meeting Jesus in such people, and the people who neglected the poor and disadvantaged were also surprised because they never expected to meet Jesus in such people.

Another surprise is this: by what measure does God judge you? Surprise! God doesn't first ask you what you believe or if you have accepted Jesus as your personal savior or if you hold certain theological doctrines. God doesn't ask you if you go to the right church. God doesn't care if you belong to the Baptist Church, Lutheran, United Church of Christ, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, or United Methodist. God doesn't care if you were baptized by immersion as an adult or sprinkled as a baby. Baptism isn't even mentioned. Yet all these people who have been kind and served the less fortunate are meeting Jesus and are welcomed into God's joyous presence.

How does God judge you? This parable says that God evaluates you daily by how you are treating the forgotten people in your neighborhood, town, or nation. What about the lonely person at work? What about the individual who is always picked on and made fun of in school? What about the person in prison? Do you care about how he or she is treated? How do you relate to them?

Last week, I received a letter from an attorney who represents a man on death row here in Nebraska. The lawyer wants to know if there is someone in this church who might be willing to be a "pen pal" or regular correspondent with his client. He said in his letter to me that his client

likes to write and needs some communication with other human beings. If you want to volunteer, give me a call, and I will give you the information you need.

What I especially appreciate about this parable is that the people who have been doing all the right things in the way they treat the forgotten among us are surprised that they have been doing God's work and have been meeting Jesus every day. And yet, isn't it true that many of the truly good people among us are always surprised. "Who, me? I haven't done anything unusual." 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. Even though you did not know you were meeting Jesus in all that you were doing, you were meeting him. As you did it to one of the least of these my sisters and brothers, you did it unto me."

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

The parable makes one more point. There are other people who are surprised in a way they least expected. These are individuals who 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. They are totally surprised when God says to them: "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." They can't believe it. They were certain they knew Jesus personally. "Why?" they ask. "What did we do to deserve that judgment, that punishment?"

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 give me clothing, 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 thought we were meeting you in all the right places. We never expected to meet you in such people." These people had always thought of Jesus as being found in safe places where everything was okay. They never imagined that they could meet him every day in the presence of the sick, the hungry, the thirsty, and those in prison.

A more contemporary translation might go something like this: "Whatever in the world would Jesus be doing among the divorced, the handicapped, the persecuted, the unemployed, abused children, abused spouses, those who have AIDS, the homeless, the drug addicts, gay and lesbians?"

We're sorry we missed you, Jesus, but we had no idea you'd be found among such people. We expected to find you only among the righteous, the beautiful people, only among our kind and in our kind of church.

Do you want to meet Jesus every day? According to this parable, the way to do so is through loving and serving others, especially those who are the most forgotten and rejected among us. The message of this story is not so much about what it will be like to be in the presence of God

in the life after this life. Rather, it is about the surprising blessing of meeting Jesus in the here and now.

Several years ago in a sermon, I told a story about a monastery that was dying. I am going to end this sermon with this story, even though you've heard it before. There was a time in the past when people from all over the world came to this 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 monks chose one of their number to 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." Although 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.