Sunday, November 20, 2005
FINDING GOD IN SURPRISING PLACES
Matthew 25:31-46

Being surprised is a part of life. Some surprises are good. Others are not. You go to your physician for a regular check-up. You are surprised to learn that you have a tumor. What will the biopsy reveal? Surprise! It is benign. Or surprise! It is malignant.

Surprise is a major theme in the Bible, and especially in the life and teachings of Jesus. Here are a few examples of surprises from his teachings: “The first shall be last and the last first. Not everyone who calls me Lord will enter God’s realm. Blessed are the meek, for they shall 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; you never know when and where it will blow. In other words, the Spirit is full of surprises.

Also in the Bible, and especially in the teachings of Jesus, surprise is frequently connected with the idea of God’s judgment. When people talk about God’s judgment, it is often associated primarily with a final judgment day, which will occur at the end of time. Within the church, there has been much discussion about when and how the world will end and how God’s judgment fits in. There have been those who set specific dates and were surprised when they were wrong.

Years ago, I knew a man who continually predicted that the end of the world, followed by God’s judgment, was going to take place very soon. Each morning, he would come out of his house, look up, and say joyfully, “This could be the final judgment day.” If you asked what was going to take place if it were the judgment day, he would answer, “The saved will be taken up in glory, and the rest of you will burn in hell.”

There are different understandings of God’s judgment. It has also been defined as not being a particular day on which all people will stand before God, or even the day you die, but as the conviction that this is a moral world, and therefore judgment is continually taking place in the here and now. “What you sow, you will also reap,” as the Bible teaches.

This concept of God’s judgment reminds you that throughout your life you are faced with choices, and you can choose good or evil. You can try to live according to God’s will as you understand it, or go against God’s will. Good and bad consequences naturally flow from your choices, not always immediately, but in the long run. Furthermore, your good and bad choices always affect others for good or for ill. Judgment is ongoing.

Surprise and judgment are the major themes in the parable of the sheep and the goats found in Matthew’s gospel. This talk of judging, of sorting out the sheep and goats, sounds negative and even dangerous. It’s not healthy to think in terms of “us” and “them,” of those who pass the test and those who don’t.

But Jesus wants you to understand that God's sorting of the flock is not to divide the good from the bad by giving a test to determine if you have the correct beliefs or belong to the right church.

The first surprise in this story, which Jesus wants you to remember, is — the way you treat people is the way you treat God. In this story, the emphasis is on the way you treat the kind of people others ignore, hate, and exclude — the people who lack the basic necessities of life that most others take for granted: food, drink, clothing, shelter. A second category of forgotten people, who are sometimes hated and excluded, is composed of those who are lonely — the strangers and those who are different from the majority. Such people are often excluded out of fear and prejudice. A third category is made up of people who are in prison. When you are kind and hospitable, especially to people in these categories, surprise! You are being kind and hospitable to God. "Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these my sisters and brothers, you did it unto me." Surprise! The presence of God is discovered in people where you least expect to meet God. You are to act toward others as if Christ is present in them, even the stranger you believe you have reason to fear.

Not only do you meet God in surprising people, but the parable also reminds you that there are some surprising things about God. By what criteria does God judge you and me? The Holy One doesn't first ask what you believe, or if you know the correct theological formulations. The God in this story doesn't ask whether you were baptized by immersion or baptized at all. All the people who have been kind and served the outcasts are welcomed into God's presence.

God only wants to know what you have done with the forgotten people and the outcasts in your town, neighborhood, prison, or country. What about the lonely person where you work? How about the student everyone teases and picks on in school? The way you treat such people is the way you treat God.

The second surprise in this story is when the people discover they have been meeting and relating to God and have not been aware of it. They have done good without realizing they were serving God. Surprise! There are people who are religious in the best sense of the word without being conscious of it. They don't do their good works in an attempt to earn God's approval. They are not seeking any kind of reward.

The fact is that the truly good people you meet day after day are always surprised. "Who? Me? I haven't done anything special." They don't know they are meeting God every day in the people they serve. They do good naturally and are surprised that anyone would even notice their good deeds or call them good. They are embarrassed if their goodness is discovered and publicized.

Jesus says to them, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." In other words, "Welcome into God's presence, you have been in God's presence all along and didn't know it. You never expected any kind of reward for your goodness, but it's yours forever."

With this story, Jesus is saying, "There are people, and may their number increase, who go about doing good without being aware of it. They are not motivated by reward but simply by

doing the right thing to do. They are surprised to discover they have been meeting God every day."

The third surprise in this story is when the individuals who had always thought they were the most religious and deserved special rewards discover that finding and serving God is not what they thought. Up to this point, they were certain that they had the right beliefs, were baptized in the correct way, and belonged to the only true church, so naturally they were numbered among the elect. They were very surprised when God said to them, "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 asked in surprise. "When did we see you hungry or thirsty, or a stranger, or sick, or in prison?" These people never imagined that God would be found in such wretched people. How could God be found in the outcasts, the rejected, the poor, the abused, those in prison, the homeless, the drug addicts, and the mentally unbalanced?

Can't you hear them saying, "We're sorry we missed you, God, or neglected you, but we had no idea you'd be found in such people?" They had always thought of God as being in safe places. If God was to be found in people, it would be in people like them, the righteous, those who lived up to their standards.

Or maybe these people who had missed God among the rejected and the outcasts were 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. They expected to find and serve God in the big events that make the headlines, where they could be properly honored and praised for their good works.

All of this is related to the fourth surprise in this story. Where is God to be found? You discover and come to know God in everyday life, in serving others, especially the rejected and the forgotten.

All too often, people make the mistake of thinking that God is a separate compartment in the world and in their lives, and so people speak of things as being either sacred or secular. But such is not the case according to this story told by Jesus. God is to be found in everyday life and especially among people who are suffering.

Here's a little poem I've used before, which has been a big help 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 down to the people.

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 the people."

Do you want to find and know God? According to this story told by Jesus, the way to find God is through loving and serving others, especially those people who are the most forgotten and rejected. The truth in this story is not about what it will be like to be in the presence of God at the end of time. It is about the surprising blessing of knowing and living in God's presence in the here and now.

Several years ago, I told an old story about a monastery that was dying. 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.