

When Was It That We Saw You...

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The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill

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Matthew 25: 31-46

This morning we formally welcome the Reverend Beth Hessel to her role as Parish Associate. Beth has been a long-time friend and colleague in the church, and I am delighted by this development. You know her for her participation in this community, and as the parent to Lydia and Isaac. She's a fine church historian, serving now as the Executive Director of the Athenaeum of Philadelphia after serving as Executive Director of the Presbyterian Historical Society. As Parish Associate, a particular title within Presbyterian parlance, Beth will lead us in worship, preach from time to time, teach. In general, this formalizes her relationship with us. Beth, welcome, and thank you for your willingness to share your gifts with us in this way.

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There is a kind of simple way to look at the Bible as a book filled with answers. What should I believe about this? Turn to the Bible. How should I behave? Let's see what the Bible says. If you are willing to grant that the answers are often more complex and nuanced than a simple do this/don't do this checklist, I can live with this understanding. But more often than not, I think of the Bible equally as a book of questions, challenging questions, complex ones, laser-like. There are dozens and dozens of examples of this – questions that go right to the heart of who God is and who we are and what we are called to do.

- Moses asks God, “who is it that is sending me?”
- Micah asks, “what does the Lord require of you?”
- Jesus asks his followers, “who do people say that I am?”
- A rich man asks Jesus, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”
- Pilate asks Jesus, “what is truth?”

A book of questions. There are times when the answers are simple, though never simplistic. They tell us about who God is, what it means to follow Jesus. They hold

up a mirror to our own lives and relationships. And like every good question, they can lead to more questions, deeper ones, reminding us all that the life of faith is always about a journey – as our confirmation class members would remind us – and rarely about the destination.

So remember that, for a moment...questions.

A few weeks back, your Session adopted a proposal from the church's Racial Justice Working Group. The group came into being a little more than a year ago, catalyzed in part by the murder of George Floyd and the strong sense that we were called to respond. The group met many times over Zoom. We spent much of the last year offering educational opportunities – reading books and articles that helped enlighten and raise awareness. The proposal adopted by the Session is the next step, an important step, in our journey, our anti-racist, racial justice seeking journey. It is called the Matthew 25 initiative. Matthew 25 is an initiative of our denomination, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). As this morning's bulletin suggests, Matthew 25 has three focal points:

- **Building congregational vitality** by challenging people and congregations to deepen their faith and get actively and joyfully engaged with their community and the world.
- **Dismantling structural racism** by advocating and acting to break down the systems, practices and thinking that underlie discrimination, bias, prejudice and oppression of people of color.
- **Eradicating systemic poverty** by working to change laws, policies, plans and structures in our society that perpetuate economic exploitation of people who are poor.

Building congregational vitality. Dismantling structural racism. Eradicating systemic poverty. By adopting this proposal, the Session said that these things matter to this church, and that we are called to invest time and energy and resources in them.

What will that look like? The Matthew 25 initiative offers no programmatic checklist. Churches are not accountable to anyone except themselves, and to God, I suppose. Having made this commitment, however, I hope that it becomes more than a tagline, but rather an ethos that permeates how we engage our minds, at every age; how we worship; how we deepen and broaden our social

witness to continue to include hands-on efforts, with enhanced efforts on relationship development with partners and communities, and reflections on our experiences through this lens. We will continue to read books together. We will visit places, and invite people to visit us. We will gather our children and youth and engage them.

Who knows where this will take us. The journey will always be imperfect and incomplete, but, especially, for such a time as this, and for such a congregation as this, the commitment is important, the calling real.

As I have suggested, all of this is predicated around a question, a seemingly simple question whose response is anything but simplistic. Jesus is on a roll in Matthew 25 and the chapters preceding it. He shares a series of parables that lay out what the kingdom of heaven looks like, many centered on who will be included and who will not. This feels uncomfortable to us, or at least to me, who wants everybody to be included. We will encounter Matthew 25 over the coming months and this, surely, will be an ongoing point of discussion.

These parables culminate with a proclamation – all of this, remember, is preparing us for Jesus' death – a proclamation about what happens after he dies. He will return, and a kind of sorting commences. Again, discomfort – let's acknowledge that. But perhaps we also acknowledge that as discomfited as we might be with Jesus' sorting, we also presume that if and when it happens, that the sorting will work out pretty well for us; for others, not so much.

So, the sorting, sheep and goats. Right and left. Sorry, lefthanders. The people are confused by the criteria. They haven't knowingly said or done anything either to earn reward *or* merit rejection. This will be worth much more time than we can give it this morning, but it's worth noting now.

As much as we are discomfited, and maybe even put off, by the notion of a divine sorting that determines our eternal disposition, look at the criteria. It's not about saying the right thing. It's not about believing the right thing. It's not about how much you give. No, the sorting is based on an ethical response to this question, this one, big, Matthew 25 question.

*"... 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.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’”* You can read the rest, the later disposition of the goats, the negation of how the righteous respond and the result of that choice.

It is all predicated on a question. “When was it that we saw you...?” And Jesus’ answer is simply profound, or profoundly simple, and leads us to this proposal, this initiative. “Just as you did this to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” We encounter Jesus when we encounter those with earthly, human, real need.

The Matthew 25 initiative is not solely about race, and racism, but it’s no strenuous extrapolation to identify connections between racism and the conditions Jesus identifies – hunger, homelessness, poverty. It’s no strenuous extrapolation to identify connections when Jesus lifts up the plight of the stranger and the imprisoned and mass incarceration and the disproportionate percentage of black men imprisoned, or our ongoing inability to think faithfully about refugees and immigration without getting caught up in racist tropes and hackneyed politics.

Again, this is not about a programmatic checklist. Nor does it suggest that we read a few books and we’ve done our part. Nor is it about taking positions on things, controversial or not, though I hope we can find the grace to wade into challenging conversations that needn’t ever be partisan but that might, to use a word of the day, discomfort us.

To be sure, I am not sure how well Matthew 25 reflects our theology, what we think about God, and our ecclesiology, what we think about the church. Sheep and goats is so binary, inviting us into a slippery slope of us/them, of labeling, of the easy belief that 1. We are the sheep, when we might not be and that 2. The sheep/goat, good/bad, us/them approach is how God sees things. This can easily slip into the language of privilege: *I have food, clothing, shelter. I am not in jail. I*

belong here. A kind of paternalistic approach to “helping” the less fortunate, the privileged sheep helping the poor unfortunate goat, rather than building relationships, covenants of equality and equity, uncovering the grace that’s already present, and addressing the burden of worldly condition.

If I had a magic denominational wand I might have landed on another passage or two to frame this effort: the “love your neighbor” initiative, for example, or Micah 6 – do mercy, love justice, walk humbly. Matthew 25 is what we have. It joins us with other congregations on similar quests. And it does lift up what we need to be engaging right now – race and poverty and all the implications.

Even by joining this movement, we do so humbly. It is much less an articulation of an achievement, it seems to me, than a statement of aspiration. It is an invitation to accountability. We will read books and build relationships and visit places and, eventually, we might advocate or take action. That would all be good.

But Matthew 25 is also an important opportunity to interrogate our own attitudes and perspectives and behaviors, and our collective life as a congregation.

Matthew 25 is a framework, a lens. It puts a name on some of what we are doing already and provides a way to reflect, calling us more deeply and fully, so that when we visit West Kensington or prepare a meal or donate a backpack, or read a book or articulate an idea or pray a prayer, we can ask how we are seeing Jesus in that moment.

The Swiss theologian Emil Brunner, a contemporary of Karl Barth, once commented that a church exists for mission as a fire for burning. That is to say, whether it is Matthew 25 or something like it, this is what we are called to do. To engage the world in all its beauty and brokenness and to take up Jesus’ ethical mandate that we make a difference. To do any less is to miss Jesus’ basic point, at least, and to miss a critical opportunity for us to continue living into the vision of who we are called to be.

We will live with these words, and their call, for a season, seeking to answer the question, “Lord, when was it that we saw you” with a sense of urgent hope, and believing that as we go about this transformative work, that we, too, will be transformed, and will know God’s fullest blessing. Amen.