



A SURPRISE ENDING

Psalm 112; Matthew 25:31-46

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I like to read a good mystery. There is something satisfying about a mystery in which the clues, that have been there all along, finally come together and all the loose ends are tied up. When the surprise ending comes, I wonder, “Why didn’t I see that?”

Human history itself can be something of a mystery. Can we discern a thread of purpose in history? Some would say that the trends point to an emerging and yet unrealized purpose. Dr. Martin Luther King said that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” Others see life as the result of not yet fully understood complex mechanical or bio-chemical processes. When some think about the tragedies and follies of history, they are inclined to agree with Macbeth: “Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player, that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more; it is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing (*Macbeth*, Act V. Scene 5, 25-29).”

The Bible opens a way to understand the meaning and destiny of history. The God who creates the universe has a divine purpose for the creation that has its center and its end in Christ. The redemption revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus will find its ultimate fulfillment in Christ. When we know the end of the story, we can live in the present with confident faith.

Jesus tells a parable about the Son of Man who comes at the end of history. It is a parable full of surprises. The first surprise is that the final judgment includes not just the church, but all the peoples of the earth. He is not separating Christians from non-Christians, or even faithful Christians from nominal Christians. He separates the sheep from the goats. The sheep feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, and visit the sick and the imprisoned. The goats are those who do not demonstrate compassion to the hungry, the stranger, the naked, the sick, or the imprisoned.

We have heard this parable so often that we assume it is a warning to all who follow Jesus “to walk the walk, not just talk the talk.” Certainly, that is true. Yet, there is evidence in the language Jesus uses that he may be speaking about how those beyond the church act with compassion or fail to demonstrate mercy. In gathering the peoples of the earth, Jesus gives us a picture not only of how Christians will be held accountable, but also how the world will be judged based on its compassion to the hungry, the poor, and the suffering.

Jesus is present in the vulnerable people of the earth. People tend to keep their eyes on the rich and the powerful, the movers and shakers, and the famous and the influential; but God has the divine eye on the outcasts and the forgotten, the imprisoned and the deprived, the hungry and the homeless. If these are the ones God is watching, then we had better reorient our priorities and get a heart of compassion. All people will be held accountable for how they treat “the least of these who are members of my family.”

In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus uses the phrase, “the least of these,” to describe the disciples he sends out into the world. Jesus says, “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me... and whoever gives even

a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple – truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward (Matthew 10:40, 42).” Even non-believers who show kindness to his disciples will receive kindness from God.

John Calvin spoke of the “common work” of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is active not only in the church, but also beyond the church. Wherever there is goodness, truth, compassion, and justice, we see God’s Spirit at work in the world. Sometimes, folks beyond the church act with more courage and compassion than folks within the church. The Spirit is working with those outside the church to wake up the people inside the church to be more concerned about housing, food, jobs, and health care for the afflicted, the poor, and the vulnerable.

The parable is a reminder to the church not to be so judgmental about those whose beliefs and practices are not our own. We should leave such matters to God. We are called to witness to Christ, to serve others in his name, and to leave the results to God. It is not our job to separate the sheep from the goats. Leave the final judgment to God.

There is a second surprise in this parable. The final judgment is based not on right doctrine, but on the right practice of love. Don’t misunderstand me. What we believe has eternal consequences. It is essential that we put our trust in a loving God and a gracious Savior. Yet, faith has never been simply a matter of agreeing to doctrines about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the Church, and the Bible. Our faith is a living faith that leads to a transformed, holy life. The fruit of faith is the practice of love. So much of what we Christians argue about in the church and among different denominations does not matter. In fact, our preoccupation with secondary issues keeps us from having our hearts, minds, and resources focused on the one thing that matters most – the practice of love.

The prayer of St. Francis reminds us that the Christian life is a call to live for others: “O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.” Don’t wait until you are drawing your last breath to discover that, in the end, it was loving kindness that mattered most of all.

In the novel, *The Secret Life of Bees*, Lily Owens is a fourteen-year-old girl who runs away from home to escape a brutal father. She finds no comfort from her racist minister, her fundamentalist church, or the community in which she lives. She ends up in a small South Carolina town at the home of three sisters who keep bees. They teach Lilly about beekeeping and life. They listen to her troubles and nurture her body and soul. They teach her how to forgive herself and how to love herself. One day, Augusta Boatwright, the head of the family, tells Lily about the power of love that dwells deep in her. She says, “And when you get down to it, Lily, that’s the only purpose grand enough for a human life. Not just to love – but to persist in love” (p. 289, Sue Monk Kidd, *The Secret Life of Bees*).

The final surprise in this parable is that everyone is shocked by the verdict. Those who have fed the hungry, clothed the naked, and visited the imprisoned are flabbergasted that they have done these things to the Lord. Those who have neglected to demonstrate compassion, practice justice, and share their resources are dumbstruck that Jesus was among the poor and they did not see him. The righteous and the unrighteous are taken completely by surprise. Both ask, “Lord when

did we see you?” Unremembered and unrecognized deeds are rewarded; the failure to practice mercy is punished. The unrighteous make the terrible discovery that they missed their chance. It is not that the people we meet “might be Jesus,” they are Jesus. There is no one – not even the most difficult person we know – in whom Jesus is not present. His image may be broken, distorted, or hard to see, but it is there waiting to be restored through the power of love.

In my last year of college, a friend and I worked as night tutors in a Boys’ Home. We went from desk-to-desk to check English papers, call out vocabulary, review science questions, and untangle math problems. The boys were struggling, not just with homework, but with life. Most of the boys came from dysfunctional homes; most of them didn’t want to be there. They acted out their anger at school and at the home. I watched the housemother interact with the boys. She was firm but loving. I didn’t know how she found such patience.

One night my friend and I were venting our frustration to her. She said, “I guess I have learned the importance of persistence. These boys have known adults who disappoint them, beat them, yell at them, ignore them, and give up on them. At times I find myself not liking some of them very much, but it doesn’t mean I stop loving them. I tell myself that no matter what I think, they belong to Jesus. One day I will see his face clearly in each one of them.” She knew the key to the kingdom. She knew that Jesus is Lord of all and one day he will come to set things right. She knew that what matters to Jesus is how we treat one another. So, she kept looking for his face in the faces of those boys.

God delights in the things that flow unconsciously out of a life shaped by the Spirit. True discipleship is a habit of the heart. When our character conforms to Christ’s character, then practicing love, mercy, and justice is not something we have to think about; it just becomes a part of who we are.

Over past year with you, I have seen who you are. I have seen how acts of justice, love, and mercy flow from your lives – lives that have been shaped by Christ. Kindness with you is a way of life. I have seen how you care for one another and how you care for the stranger in our city. I have seen how you accept differences and don’t make a big deal of things that don’t matter much. I remember making a comment to one of you about some sacrificial act of kindness you had done for another, and you looked at me with surprise. It took you a moment to remember what I was talking about. You had simply done it as a natural, unremarkable gift from the heart. Never forget who you are. I will hold the memories of your faithfulness in my heart forever. Your love has been a blessing to Bunny and me.

So much of life plays like a mystery in which the outcome is unknown. Jesus makes the mystery clear. He lets us in on the surprise ending. When we know the *end* of history, we know how to live well *in* history. In the end, the world will be surprised to know that the future belongs to Jesus and not to the brutal, selfish, and demonic powers of this world. On that day, Jesus will reveal what you already know: the practice of love in a broken and hurting world is what endures forever.

All the clues to the future are revealed. On that day, there won’t be any surprise or any need for you or me to wonder, “Why didn’t I see that?”