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Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24, Matthew 24:31-46
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“Surprise Endings”

My father-in-law loved to read Agatha Christie mysteries. Given her long career, he had a lot to choose from. Dame Agatha wrote over 80 novels and plays. Her works have been produced on the radio, the stage, television and the cinema. Her stories of intrigue have been translated into over 40 languages and have sold more than two billion copies, which is more than any other writer except Shakespeare. He enjoyed reading them so much that he would even read some over again. Once, I asked him why he liked to read them the second time when he knew, from the beginning, "who had done it?" He said he had the happy facility of forgetting the end so that even a second reading always provided a surprise ending.

Who doesn't love a good mystery with a surprise ending?

Jesus tells the disciples a parable about the coming of Christ and the final judgment at the end of history. It is a parable full of surprises.

The first surprise is that this picture of the final judgment includes not just the church, but all the people of the earth. The Son of Man gathers the nations 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 and the imprisoned.

We have heard this parable so long that we just assume it is a kind of warning to all of us who claim to follow Jesus "to walk the walk, not just talk the talk." Certainly, that truth can be found in the parable. Yet, there is evidence in the very language Jesus uses that he may be speaking about how those beyond the church act with compassion or fail to demonstrate mercy. In gathering all the peoples of the earth, could it be that Jesus is giving us a picture - not only of how we in the church will be held accountable for how we have treated others, but also how the world will be judged on the basis of its compassion to the hungry, the poor and the suffering?

The peoples of the earth will be judged on the basis of how they treat "the least of these who are members of my family." Earlier in Matthew's gospel, Jesus uses that little phrase, "the least of these," to describe the disciples when he sends them out into the world to proclaim the gospel and carry out his ministry. 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." (Matt. 10:40, 42).

Perhaps Jesus is saying that 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, justice and beauty, we see God's Holy Spirit at work in the world.

Sometimes, folks beyond the church act with more courage and compassion than folks within the church. Maybe the Spirit is working with those outside the church to wake up the folks inside the church to be more concerned about housing, food, jobs and health care for the afflicted, the poor and the vulnerable.

Maybe 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 simply to witness to Christ, to serve others in his name and to leave the results of our efforts to God. Jesus is saying 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 in our gracious Savior, Jesus Christ. Faith has never been simply a matter of agreeing to certain propositions about God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Church or the Bible. Our faith is to be a living faith that leads to a transformed and holy life. The evidence of faith or the fruit of faith is the practice of love. James writes in his epistle that *faith without works is dead*. John writes in his First Letter that those who say they love God, but hate their brothers and sisters, are liars. Jesus is saying that so much of what we Christians argue about in the church, among different denominations and with the world does not matter. In fact, our constant preoccupation with secondary controversial issues and "the finer points of the law" keep us from having our hearts, minds and resources focused on the one thing that matters most - the practice of love. Paul dares to say that all our efforts do not amount to anything if we do not use our God-given gifts in a spirit of love. The love we demonstrate to others is the only thing that lasts forever.

In the book of Ezekiel, the prophet is speaking to the people of Israel who are scattered, broken and in exile. God is angry with the leaders of the people. The leaders are to be like shepherds who look after the flock and give special protection to the young, the weak, the wounded and hungry. Instead of feeding the flock, these shepherds are fleecing the flock. They make themselves rich at the expense of the poor; they take resources that belong to all and squander them on themselves. The days are coming when the Lord will cast out these false shepherds who do not practice love. The Lord will put one shepherd over them who will practice mercy and act with compassion. Jesus Christ is the good shepherd who cares for the flock and teaches us how to care. He is the true model of leadership and living. This shepherd will stand as judge over all the peoples of the earth. All the peoples will be judged on how well they practiced compassion to the weak, the poor and the vulnerable.

The familiar prayer of St. Francis of Assisi 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 it is too late and you have drawn your last breath to discover with astonishment that, at the end, it was loving kindness that mattered most of all.

The final element of surprise in this story of last judgment is that everyone who is judged 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 just as 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. 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 mercy becomes a part of who we are.

Jesus is present in every person we meet. This week, a friend in the church said that we find our meaning in life not in wealth or power or in the great and glorious experiences of life, but in the ordinary moments and relationships that mark our daily living. True greatness comes when we recognize the spiritual significance and holy mystery of everyday things. How well we live and how well we love depend upon our ability to keep our eyes open for Jesus.

Some years ago, I read about John Umhau, a physician who had taken his practice to the street. He divided his practice between a medical clinic connected to a soup kitchen in Washington and one connected with a homeless shelter in Baltimore. It was John's involvement with a Christian fellowship group in college that led him to his commitment to do something for "the least of these." John wrote, "There is something real about people who have hit bottom and are not affected by all the trappings of success. It's kind of refreshing to be around people like that, believe it or not... It feels like you are doing something real." (p. 40, *The Davidson Journal*, Fall 1990). Caring for the vulnerable stranger feels real because Jesus meets us in the stranger as the One who is most real of all.

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. Dr. Albert C. Winn calls such a way of life an *ethic of anticipation*. He writes:

Since this is the way it is going to be ultimately and finally, then let us begin now.
Let us tell the truth now. Let us stop playing games with each other now. If we are to be judged by how we have treated the least of these, let us begin now to

reevaluate who's important. Let us approximate justice. Let us practice compassion. Let us stop worrying so much about what people think and what people may say and what the newspaper may publish. Let us ask what the Judge will think and what the Judge will say. (p. 150, *A Christian Primer*).

We need to know the end of history so we will know how to live well in the middle of history. We live in the present on the basis of the future. In the end, the world will be surprised to know that the future belongs to Jesus and not to the brutal, selfish and sometimes demonic powers of this world. On that day, Jesus will reveal that the practice of love in a broken and hurting world is what matters most. When we stand before the throne of grace, perhaps the biggest surprise of all will be that the things we have done in our lives which have most pleased our Lord will be the very things which seemed so insignificant at the time that we didn't even bother to remember them. Take heart: we don't need to remember, because Jesus remembers everything.