

Sermon Draft

Text: Matthew 25:31–46

Sermon: Last Sunday 2017

The end of the Church Year naturally brings to our attention the end of time as we know it. The Gospel, our sermon text, pictures Jesus' return in glory for the final judgment. ***"Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power"*** (Epistle, 1 Corinthians 15:24). But this Last Day is also a beginning: ***"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says our Lord, "the first and the last, the beginning and the end"*** (Verse, Rev 22:13). ***"We are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth"*** (2 Peter 3:13 NIV).

For believers, both the end and the new beginning are good news. "The last enemy to be destroyed is death" (1 Cor 15:26). And the new heaven and earth is the home of righteousness.

Way back in 2006, scientists gazed into the heavens. A spacecraft was returning from a seven-year mission and brought with it particles of comet dust. Having gazed into the heavens, the scientists now gazed through microscopes at the dust of heaven, hoping to discover within this material clues to the mystery of life.

Before science became the final court of meaning, however, artists were busy gazing into the heavens, creating paintings of a different court and of a different day: a day of judgment, when Christ would return and reveal for all people the meaning of life.

Taking a quick glance through paintings of the last judgment, one discovers a common theme. The heavens are torn open as Christ descends on a throne and the earth is breaking apart as the dead rise from their graves.

While the paintings are usually too busy, with many human bodies mixed together with many angels and demons, one factor is fairly consistent. If you look closely, if you stare at the face of just one human being, you'll find on that face a look of discovery. People look as if they're waking from sleep and only beginning to discover the deeper meaning of the world, of their Lord, and of the life that once surrounded them.

Today, we will look closely at Matthew's Gospel, and in it experience for ourselves some of that Last Day's sense of discovery, for in this parable of the Last Day, Jesus reveals the mysteries of eternal life.

In our parable, Jesus speaks to his disciples about the end, and yet his words talk about the beginning. Notice how Jesus describes the kingdom of heaven. He says, ***“Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world”*** (v 34). In contrast, as Jesus speaks to the wicked, he does not say, ***“Inherit the punishment prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”*** Instead, he says, ***“Depart . . . into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels”*** (v 41).

God never prepared hell for his human creatures. No, from the very beginning, God’s intentions were always that humanity would live in eternal fellowship and blessedness with him. No one was ever predestined to hell. All were created to live with God and to rejoice with him in his creation.

Those who go to hell go there by their own choosing, for they have rejected Jesus and God's original design for all people in him.

While some might feel that this parable is about the end of the world, it does not offer us a picture of the world ending at all. Instead, Jesus offers us a discovery of the world, as God intended it. God's original desire was for humanity to live in relationship with him, and the day when Christ returns will be the day when God's dreams for creation finally and fully come true.

People often misunderstand Christianity. They think that it's all about escaping this world in order to live in heaven. For them, Christians stand at a distance from this world, wanting to escape its physical existence so that they can go on, as disembodied souls, to eternal life in heaven. Yet that is not what we believe or what we confess.

Every time we confess the faith, we speak of the resurrected body, and we declare our confidence in “the life of the world to come.”

The mission of Jesus Christ was to bring all people into God’s eternal kingdom. Although we had turned away from God, rejecting his design and falling into sin in the Garden of Eden, God the Father turned toward us, still holding on to his original design. Out of love, he sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to bear our sin and to be our Savior.

Baptized into his death and resurrection, our eternal life with God begins. In him, there will be a new creation, and we will be raised to live in the world as God originally desired it to be. Until that time, we live as stewards. We care for this world as those who have discovered in Jesus what God intended creation to be. We trust in, we live in, and we long for God’s new creation in him.

As Jesus speaks to his disciples about the end, notice how he opens their eyes to the rule of God in him. As one listens closely to the text, one discovers the fullness of God in Jesus. He appears first as the Son of Man, that figure from Daniel (Daniel 7:13–14), who now has finished God’s work and is therefore seated on his throne (v 31). Then, he appears as a shepherd, with the nations as his flock, now separating the sheep from the goats (v 32). Soon the shepherd becomes a King, who is also the Son of God, the Father. His rule extends over all nations and throughout all time (v 34). This King, however, is hidden in the suffering of this world (vs 35–36), just as Jesus would soon be hidden in the events of his Passion (Matthew 26–27). Jesus claims all who follow him in faith as members of his family (“my brothers” in v 40 and Mt 12:46–50) and, until that Last Day, he is known among them by his Word (“Truly, I say to you . . .” in v 40).

While some might feel this parable places Jesus at a distance, descending from heaven at the end of time, it actually reveals him as very close to us—today.

He is the Lord of all nations. God the Father has chosen him to rule over all things and to bring to fulfillment his desire to save all people. For this reason, he has fulfilled prophecy. He came in our midst to bring about the forgiving, saving rule of God in his life, death, and resurrection. Though ascended into heaven, Jesus continues to speak among us now through his Word, claiming as his family all who believe in him and shepherding them like a flock, until that day when he returns to divide those who trust in him for righteousness from those who do not.

Jesus has not left us on our own in this world, but rather comes to us in his Word and Sacraments and continues to rule in our midst, proclaiming to you the forgiveness of sins and this everlasting gift of eternal life in him.

Now, at the end of his ministry, Jesus reveals again a people, **“blessed by my Father”** (v 34). These people, already made **“righteous”** (v 37) in God’s sight by faith in Jesus, are found yet again among those suffering in this world. Only this time, they are sharing God’s mercy with those who suffer. Their merciful acts of faith come as a shock to them when Jesus reveals these good works (vs 37–39).

In an even more amazing revelation, Jesus unveils his hidden presence among those **“my brothers,”** who were hungering, thirsting, strangers, naked, sick, and imprisoned in this world (vs 35–40).

Like the righteous in our parable, God's people will never know the depth and the breadth of the good works they have done during their lifetime. On that Last Day, however, our Lord will reveal to the faithful his good works of mercy performed through their lives in this world. In addition, he will also reveal that he was present in those hidden moments of ministry, graciously receiving from our hands the mercy we didn't even know we were giving.

In 1304, Giotto di Bondone began working on a series of paintings in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, Italy. At the very back of the chapel is the largest scene, the last judgment. The paintings are frescoes, which means that Giotto and his assistants painted them on wet plaster so that the colors would penetrate the plaster and become fixed as it dries. By necessity, the painting was done quickly, but the image they produced is eternal.

Christ returns in judgment. The scene covers the whole wall, with those raised to eternal life on Christ's right and those raised to eternal punishment on Christ's left. At the bottom of the image, underneath the cross, is the doorway by which worshipers would return to the world. The last image worshipers see as they enter the world is Christ returning in glory. Imagine what that would be like.

Although we have no such image over our doors as we walk out of church, we do have this Gospel. Our Lord offers us an image of the last judgment to shape our life in this world today. As we walk through the door, opened by the cross, we enter God's world with deeper understanding. We see things differently: the creation of this world, our Lord, even our life of service. Assured of our salvation, we now rejoice in these hidden blessings of God, this vision of life, present and eternal. Amen