

Meeting Jesus Time and Time Again

Mathew 25: 31-46

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I'm going to begin with a personal story. [Warning: this sermon is filled with stories because Jesus wants to speak to our hearts here AND our minds in this passage.]

Thirty-two years ago, I began my seminary education out in Pasadena, CA at Fuller seminary. After two years and a half years there, I then transferred to Princeton, where I spent another two and a half years. (I needed five years to complete the three year MDiv program in order to process all I was learning.)

I chose Fuller Seminary because it has a phenomenal program focusing on World Missions. At that time in my life my interest was to get a degree in Cross-cultural studies and return to Japan, where I had just served for a year. Turns out God had other plans for me, but I learned a great deal in my studies there.

One of the classes I took was called, "Incarnational Ministry among the Urban Poor." The name is long and awkward...but it's living and doing ministry among the urban poor. One of the requirements for the class was to participate in two experiences of living among them. One for two nights and one for a week. The idea was to get out of our comfort zones, to see life from a different point of view, and to experience the hospitality so often offered by people who have so little. A group of four of us decided to embark out together. So each of us took \$5 and spent a week on the streets of LA, posing as travelers. At first it was kind of exhilarating, but it became uncomfortable to experience what it's like to have to beg for money; to go to the beach fully clothed because you have no other clothes and you need a place to pass the time which doesn't cost money; to stand in lines at soup kitchens and to vulnerably ask to be fed; to be told by police to move along and not to loiter; to see the underside of life in parks at night, and to see just how much energy it takes not just to manage your belongings during the day but to find some place that will allow you to wash up each day.

I would guess that the professors wanted the students to get a glimpse of Matthew 25. To move beyond the life of studies and to "walk a mile in someone else's shoes." But more importantly, to encounter Jesus. And we did...time and time again, just as Jesus promised. Whenever you and I spend time and minister to "the least of these," we will always see Jesus staring right back at us. And those experiences change us, don't they?

Of course it was relatively easy to get through those few days, knowing that would NEVER be my permanent life situation. I have resources. I have education. I have family who would never let that ever happen to me. The passage, though, is directed not at those who find themselves

in marginalized situations who live in homelessness, hunger, imprisonment or alone in their illness. Jesus tells this parable for the benefit of those who are like us...who aren't living in the margins. Jesus seems to be promising — to those of us born thousands of years too late to meet the historical Jesus in person — that the closest we can come to a transformative face-to-face encounter with Jesus is to aid and be fully present to the poor and marginalized.

What I know, is those experiences and others like them (for example, when I visit someone in the hospital or in prison or someone who is a stranger) continue to transform my heart and I am greedy for more. I NEED to see Jesus because it makes my heart sing. That's why every time we go down to do a Midnight Run with the homeless and working poor of NYC, or we cook and feed at Manna House or participate in Homefront, or love and get to know Manal and her wonderful children...we are in an act of worship.

But, it's not always easy to stay open hearted, is it? Especially when confronted with the choice day in and day out. The comfort and ease that privilege bring us sometimes wins out. Frederick Douglass, in his autobiography, tells the story of his Baltimore slave mistress, Mrs. Sophia Auld. *"My new mistress proved to be ... a woman of the kindest heart ... But, alas! this kind heart had but a short time to remain such. The fatal poison of irresponsible power was already in her hands."* Douglass reports that when Sophia's husband finds out that she has treated the slaves well, he forbids it. As she begins treating him as less than human, he witnesses Sophia's descent into the demonic: *"That cheerful eye, under the influence of slavery, soon became red with rage; that voice, made all of sweet accord, changed to one of harsh and horrid discord; and that angelic face gave place to that of a demon."*

"Where love is inhibited, spiritual death soon follows," as one colleague said.

We may be initially willing for the process of transformation, but we find that what an encounter Jesus requires, is a total willingness to lay oneself bare to all that inhibits us from connection and love.

This week I found a story entitled, *Asleep in the Lord*, from the New Yorker back in 2011. Here's how it starts:

Mitchell had never so much as changed a baby's diaper before. He'd never nursed a sick person, or seen anyone die, and now here he was, surrounded by a mass of dying people, and it was his job to help them die at peace, knowing they were loved.

For the past three weeks, Mitchell had been in Calcutta, going to Mother Teresa's Home for the Dying Destitutes Monday through Friday, from nine in the morning until a little after one, and doing whatever needed doing. This included giving the men medicine, feeding them, sitting on their beds and providing company, looking into their faces and holding their hands. These things weren't something you had to learn how to do, and yet, in his twenty-two years on the planet, Mitchell had done few of them before and some of them not at all...

This [Matthew 25] was the Scripture she'd founded her work on, at once an expression of mystical belief and a practical guide for performing charity work. The bodies at the Home for the Dying Destitutes, broken, diseased, were the bodies of Christ, divinity immanent in each one. What you were supposed to do here was to take this Scripture literally. To believe it strongly and earnestly enough so that, by some alchemy of the soul, it happened: you looked into a dying person's eyes and saw Christ looking back.

This hadn't happened to Mitchell. He didn't expect it to, but by the end of his second week he had become uncomfortably aware that he was performing only the simplest, least demanding tasks at the Home. He hadn't given anyone a bath, for instance. Bathing the patients was the main service that the foreign volunteers provided. While Mitchell gave head massages, he watched people who looked in no way extraordinary perform the extraordinary task of cleaning and wiping the sick and dying men who populated the Home, bringing them back to their beds with their hair wet, their spindly bodies wrapped in fresh bedclothes. Day after day, Mitchell managed not to help with this. He was scared of what the patients' naked bodies might look like, of the diseases or wounds that might lie under their robes, and he was afraid of their bodily effluvia, of his hands touching their urine and excrement.

What follows is the story of how Mitchell one day at a time, through the use of the Jesus prayer: *Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner*, is transformed.

At first that prayer was said reluctantly. Then it began to wash over him and eventually it ran through him and out of him. That prayer became his salvation. Little by little, Mitchell's fear was transformed into a love for the people which could only be described as Christ-like, because what he came to realize is he himself was encountering Christ as he bathed them and sat with them and. Tasks which had repulsed him at first, he willingly took on. It was nothing short of miraculous. (The link is here...it's worth the read)

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/06/13/asleep-in-the-lord>

No matter where we are on the journey, God can and does use our acts to bring healing and a peace which passes all understanding to our world...Here's another from story from NPR's StoryCorps which illustrates it beautifully.

Julio Diaz, a social worker from the Bronx was coming home from a long day's work when he had an encounter with a teenager who held him up at knifepoint..."So I get off the train and I', heading up the stairs, and this young teenager pulls out a knife. He wants my money. So I just gave him my wallet and said, 'Here you go.' He starts to leave, and I'm like, 'Hey wait a minute, you forgot something. If you're going to be robbing people for the rest of the night you might as well take my coat as well to keep you warm.' So, he's looking at me like, 'what's going on here?' He said, 'Why are you doing this?' And I'm like well, 'I don't know man but if you're willing to risk your freedom for a few dollars then I guess you must really need the money. I mean all I wanted to do was, uh, go get dinner and uh if you really want to join me, then you're more than welcome. So I'm like 'look you can follow me if you want.' You know I just thought maybe he

really needs help. So you know, we go into the diner where I normally eat, we sit down in the booth. The manager comes by, the dishwasher comes by, the waiters come by to say 'Hi,' you know. The kid was like, 'you know everybody here. Do you own this place?' And I'm like, 'No, I just eat here a lot.' And he's like, 'You're even nice to the dishwasher.' And I said, 'Well, haven't you been taught you should be nice to everybody?' So he's like, 'Yeah, but I didn't think people actually behaved that way.' So I just asked him, you know, like, 'What is it you want out of life?' He just had almost a sad face. Either he couldn't answer me or he didn't want to. The bill came and I looked at him and I'm like, 'Uh it looks like you're going to have to pay for this bill cause you have my money and I can't pay for this, so if you give me my wallet back, I'll gladly treat you.' He didn't even think about it. He said, 'Yeah, here you go.' So I got my wallet back. And I gave him \$20 for it because I figure maybe it will help him, I don't know. And when I gave him the \$20 I asked him to give me something in return...which was his knife, and he gave it to me...

Any of us who have done incarnational work in this manner, and thank God both of our churches do so on a daily basis, know that those who give, are given far more than what they provide to those in need. Our hearts are stretched and our compassion is expanded because we have encountered the Spirit of Christ. We are used as instruments of God's grace in the world to bring healing and peace. There is nothing to compare it to.

It's hard sometimes, though. My desire for to be comfortable and to rest in my privilege rears its ugly head time and time again. I don't always want to be inconvenienced. I want to give on MY terms. That's why we need each other, isn't it? The reading of the scriptures and the fellowship of likeminded people who love God and who want to love and give generously and compassionately is contagious. Our rough edges have a chance to be smoothed a bit when we're in the company of others who love us and propel us forward to the cross to let those rough edges die off.

Here is one example of a Franciscan blessing from the twentieth century:

May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships, so that you may live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may work for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation and war, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and to turn their pain into joy.

May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in this world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/carlgregg/2011/11/four-spiritual-practices-for-preaching-on-matthew-25-a-progressive-christian-lectionary-commentary-on-mt-25-for-nov-20-2011/#2b4CBYKyBFmaiZu5.99> Amen! May it be so!!