

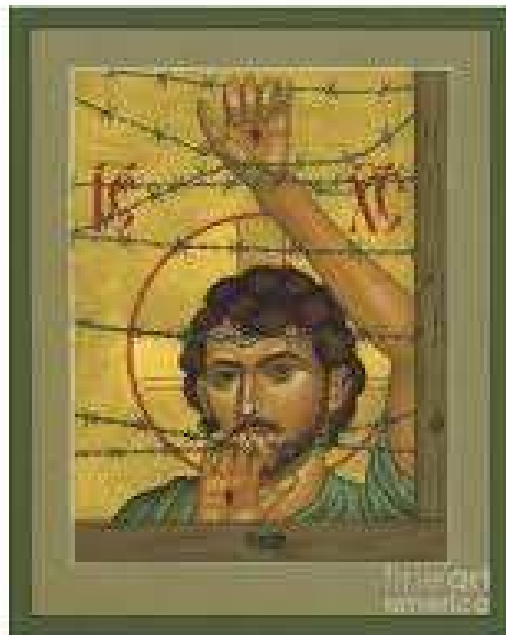
When Was it When We Saw You?

Matthew 25: 31-36

University Congregational United Church of Christ

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Rev. Loren McGrail



Dear Ones, let us start with making the list. The one that Jesus uses to measure our worthiness. If you wish, I invite you to take out a pen to write with because if you want to get into heaven you need to know who is on the list of the people you need to do something about or with. This is a community effort so you may ask the person next to you for help. Take a few moments now to write who is on the list of the overlooked, the ignored, the “least of these.”

According to Jesus, speaking as a person living under the Temple’s laws and Roman Occupation, the list should include at least one hungry person, one thirsty one, one stranger, one naked person, and one sick person, and one prisoner in this

order so you can offer food, drink, a warm welcome, some clothes, a hospital visit, and a prison visit. Presumably if you have satisfied all the requirements you will end up with the sheep and not the nasty goats.

Many of us, if we are honest, approach being a good Christian with a list like this though we might make some further additions to fit our times to include those who have been discriminated against due to their race, their gender, or sexual preference. Some will go further and add economic or social position.

Dear Ones, lose the list; the goats, and the sheep herd together in Palestine. Furthermore, if God created all then God's spirit can be found in both, in each of us too no matter who goatish we have become.

'When was it that we saw you?' is the question not who is on your list? Our greatest sin is not how many boxes we have checked off but not recognizing Jesus where he already is. (Show image of Jesus behind barb wire). This icon by Robert Linz is called Christ in the Margin. As you look at it, what do you see? Is Jesus imprisoned? Or has he come to visit the imprisoned? Or free the asylum seekers locked behind the barb wire? Dear Ones, is it possible that we have missed the whole point with our focus on getting the list, right?

The point is that Jesus inhabits all the spaces where there is lack including our own dry desert places. If we haven't recognized poverty within our own souls and how he dwells there it's hard to see him and serve him in others without being patronizing.

Listen to how my Methodist minister/poet friend puts it in his poem, The Least of These.

Whatever you did to the least of these  
you did to me.

—Matthew 25.40

This is not a simile.

The poor are not an allegory.  
God is the poor.

God is not observing them, but in them,  
the lonely and the rejected.  
God takes the lowest place.

God is the powerless one,  
the misunderstood one,  
the crucified one.

Under the bridge,  
in the nursing home,  
in solitary,

this is the throne of the Sovereign,  
the Ruler of the universe:  
the cross.

Until you see the glory of the divine  
in the street gang, the wheelchair,  
the power of the heavens in the lifer,

you do not believe.

Don't go elsewhere to worship in ease.  
Bow down, and serve, and know.

Part of bowing down and serving includes the undoing of the systems that have created the poor, the inequities, the racism, the sexism, homophobia, and transphobia. For this, I invite you to come with me to our table, the table where we break bread together and share in Jesus' passion story that leads to liberation.

For this part of my sermon, I am going to draw upon the wisdom preached by Abby Wambach, Olympic medalist in women's soccer, activist, and writer, in her commencement address to the class of 2022 at Loyola Marymount University in Westchester, New York. In the middle of her a Commencement Address she talked about how Jesus flipped the tables of power and that we are supposed to do likewise. Flipping tables, she says, is how we fight for all who have been othered in our nation, our society, our churches, and even our families. As a queer athlete, she spoke about the temptation to want to stay at the table once she finally got there and then remembered she was there to use her seat.

Abby named three ways to flip the tables of power. I invite you, Dear Ones, to think about the tables we sit at with our white skin or cis gender identities. Which tables welcome us just because... Who is missing?

The first table we must flip she says is the one that keeps track of the numbers. She says we should look at the truth the numbers point to and not be fooled by the sign or flag wavers. She says we must look at the financial investments as proof of walking the talk. For Abby, it was making sure female athletes were paid on par with male athletes. For our church, I see three interwoven places where we have the opportunity to flip some tables. One is paying a living wage to all our staff. Our budget will reflect our values in economic justice. The second is our work on anti-racism and how we are using it as a lens to view and measure our work and accomplishments not only in our church but outside the church by withdrawing our support from companies, for example, that are profiting

by Israel's ongoing occupation, or operating in the illegal Israeli settlements in the West Bank. It means becoming a Hewlett Packard free church for example.

The second table she says is getting aligned and staying aligned. It means always questioning who gets invited to the table and demanding inclusion when you see people missing. This is one way we use our seat power, she says. For example, our commitment to indigenous peoples calls us to support the Duwamish Tribe seeking recognition by the Federal Government. A seat at that table would assure them many rights they currently do not have. Another way this issue of voice and representation is showing up in our church family is how we seek to grow young and at the same time value our elders and their experience and wisdom. Can the table have highchairs and wheelchairs?

The last table she says is the call to live our solidarity out loud. "There is no solidarity without risk", she says. "There is no such thing as a silent solidarity." For example, shouldn't a formula shortage be a national emergency? Especially at a time when our nation is considering overturning women's reproductive rights to force birthing? shouldn't we all be in the streets on both of these issues? Or at least providing a way to provide formula for the women who need it the most? Or supporting measures at the federal level to safeguard women's rights to reproductive health? And when human rights and war crimes are committed in the Ukraine or Israel, shouldn't we be in that number to call it out?

Dear Ones, discipleship is so much more than making lists even really good lists and checking off the boxes. It is even more than flipping tables, however good we get at it. It's about love---the love we have for ourselves and all others and then how we serve out of this love.

I would like to end with a short poem by the great American poet Allen Ginsburg who expresses this so well:

The weight of the world

is love.

Under the burden

of solitude,

under the burden

of dissatisfaction

the weight

the weight we carry

is love.

The weight we carry is love, Dear Ones. So, ditch the lists, flip some tables, and find him where He is already waiting to share this weight of love we carry.

