

A Little Bit of Love
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
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Matthew 25:31-45
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Do you remember the tip-jar episode of *Seinfeld*? It's a classic! George goes to the pizza parlor, and it's a pay-at-the-counter kind of place. He breaks a twenty, and decides to offer a generous tip. Just as George is depositing a ten-dollar bill into the tip jar, the cashier turns away. An act of kindness goes unnoticed. But George, wanting credit for his act of generosity, sticks his hand back in the jar, hoping to retrieve his ten, and re-deposit it once the cashier turns back around. But no luck! The cashier turns around too early, and mistakenly accuses George of trying to steal her tips!

But don't be too hard on George. We all want credit for the good deeds we've done.

I'll admit it. On the rare occasion I do actually change the empty roll of toilet paper in the bathroom, I'm making a b-line straight toward my wife on the way, new roll in hand, just so she can see what a thoughtful husband she has. And when I bring bagels to the office, I'm not gonna just anonymously place them on the break-room table. I'm gonna parade them through the crowd, saying, "Look everyone, I brought bagels!" I don't wear the "I voted" sticker on election day because I'm a good citizen. I wear it because I want you to know how early I got up, how hard I worked to cast that ballot, and how much more righteous I am than you. And if I visit someone in prison, or bring chicken soup to a sick friend, or buy three-dozen cans for the food drive, or donate my old coat to the homeless shelter, or write a check to my favorite charity, I'm not saying I want a nationwide audience to hear about it, but at least a modest one – maybe just a blurb in the *Observer*. Or at the very least, a tweet to say thanks. Just a tweet, Lavar. Just one. A small one. Thanks.

It's funny. For thousands of years, Christians have pointed to today's lection, the charge to care for the least of these, as well as the Ten Commandments, as a kind of moral compass, or guidebook to righteousness. If you want to live into your divine calling, you'd better hold fast to these high standards. But it seems to me that Matthew's Jesus tells us that our long-held standards of exceptionalism, are actually...well, they're pretty standard.

You'll remember that in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says it's not enough to simply follow Torah. After all, do you really deserve a participation trophy because you don't kill your enemy, or steal from your neighbor, or cheat on your spouse? Congratulations, you've achieved a few of the most basic thresholds of common decency. Jesus challenges us to think bigger. Jesus wants us to resolve our conflicts in ways that prevent anger and jealousy before they fester. By living in such a way, Torah becomes less like an obstacle, and more like a tool for healthy, meaningful living.

In today's passage, the sheep distinguish themselves by caring for the "least of these." Who are the least? Well, they could be the economically-challenged, or the emotionally-challenged, or perhaps they are even the non-believers, or the doubters, or the different ones – you know the Gentiles. Or maybe, the least are the ones that really chafe Matthew's community, those folks who prevent the leaders of the congregation from seeing about or attending to "the most." Whoever, and whenever these "least" are, I think it's fair to say they are the kind of folks whose endorsement is not gonna raise your social status. They are not the ones to bother with. Nevertheless, the sheep share their chicken soup and their greeting cards, and most importantly their respect, with all they encounter.

But it's not like the goats don't realize they are called to be empathetic to others as well. They know they should help others. And don't doubt for a second that the goats regularly make good chicken soup and share it with their loved ones, too. I'm sure they do.

What distinguishes the sheep from the goats, is that the sheep don't offer their generosity in the hopes of some cosmic reward, or in return for a higher form of privilege. The goats, however, well their service needs some guarantees. It's got to be visible; it's got to be recorded; it's got to have some return on investment.

Today is Reign of Christ Sunday, or Christ the King Sunday. And today, just like every Sunday in humanity's history, we live in the presence of kingdoms. If you can't visualize kingdom, we can also say governments, or systems, or economies, or households. Regardless of structure, we live in a world based on the patronage system, where relationships like patron/client, master/servant, king/subject are based on a twisted mutuality. Every action has a reward or consequence, and incentives are doled out in the form of increased privilege and social standing. Therefore, it's smart to be kind to your king, or to your boss, or to any other authority, because kindness and ingenuity are rewarded. And on the flip-side, meanness and ineptitude are punished. The result is a world where you look out for those who are above you and beside you, but certainly not those who are beneath you. And since the beginning of time, every man-made system (I say man-made intentionally here!), has sought to keep power isolated, and at the top.

But today, particularly in the reading of this passage, we celebrate a new kind of king, and a new kind of kingdom. Because the Son of Man is not just a patron for the wealthy or the elite – the Son of Man is a patron even for those whose service offers him no social benefit. Jesus refuses to engage in the twisted mutuality of the patronage system, and instead exchanges it for a different kind of mutuality – the one Martin Luther King called an inescapable network tied in a single garment of destiny.

King says, what affects one person directly affects each of us indirectly. When you feed someone, or love someone, or visit someone, or nurse someone, you don't simply feed the least, you feed EVERYONE. And when you ignore someone, you don't just ignore the least, you ignore EVERYONE.

Today, Jesus is moving us away from a kingdom, and toward a kin-dom. And once more, Matthew's rhetoric is really strong. The goats can look forward to eternal punishment and the sheep can look forward to eternal life.

And once more this week, I don't really care to engage in the conversation about what happens beyond the here and now. Instead, I think Matthew's hyperbole emphasizes a very distinct set of choices.

On the one hand, we can choose to live in a kin-dom. That means we realize that our actions, and more specifically, our love for one another, is not some form of currency that guarantees us fame, or notoriety, or security, or wealth, or standing. Somedays we may find affection, other days heartache, still others persecution. Maybe even a cross. But still we love. We do so because we know that authentic relationships are ones where love, offered repeatedly to others, overcomes our deepest wounds, and our deepest vulnerabilities. And when we offer ourselves in such a way, we stand to the right of a maker, who like a loving parent or master or king, also loves and grieves and hurts, all while living among us.

On the other hand, we can choose to live in a kingdom. That means we spend our lives seeking after newer, better labels. It means we are okay having a class called the least, because at a minimum we've got a little more. But here's the thing about having a little more. A little more is never enough. And should you choose to spend your life in a kingdom, you'll always be seeking a little more – more money, more power, more stuff, more accolades, more thank-yous, more empty love, all just to have a little more than your neighbor. I don't know what you call such a place, some might describe it in fiery terms. All I know is that such a place sounds pretty empty, and pretty far-removed from God's purpose for each of us.

So, Sardisians, here's where I'll leave you. Change the toilet paper. And put a ten in the tip jar. And keep making and delivering chicken soup. And write cards. And do justice. And love mercy. And walk humbly with your God. The world may never take note. In fact, on many days it most assuredly won't. But kingdom-building isn't intended to make headlines. It's intended to slowly, but surely chip away at labels that prevent us from loving wholly and living fully.

And friends, we can't love wholly and live fully, if we're only willing to offer our affection when somebody's looking.

May God give us the strength to love like it's off the record.

Amen.