

Hmm...where to start?!?

How about the beginning? I, I think like most of you, subscribe to a God of limitless creativity and possibility. Somehow, somehow this God of ours birthed creation – vast oceans, mountain ranges, sky, and heavens, and stars, even pink flamingos. And I, I think like most of you, believe in an affectionate, intimate God. Yes, our Creator is complex, but She's also one who pays attention to the smallest of details. The same Creator who conceptualized gravity, and carved a river through the Grand Canyon, also devoted and still devotes precious, time-staking thought into the creation of every human being, and indeed every creature. And not only does God participate in our design, but God delights in our presence. The Creator loves creation!

As my theology professor Frank Tupper used to say, this is a concept so audacious it has to be true!

All of this to say, we allow ourselves to subscribe to a God with infinite power and possibilities. Why then, do SO many people believe God only has a finite capacity for love, forgiveness, and humility?!?

I believe that God's most miraculous power is Her limitless capacity for love, forgiveness and grace. And I believe God's world will only be revealed when God's people allow their understanding of God's capacity for love, forgiveness and grace to transcend worldly imagination.

I've probably read today's passage a thousand times. And every time I hear about helping the least of these, my heart swells with joy in imagining a God who not only resides alongside, but identifies with society's most vulnerable. And then, in a matter of four verses, all that joy is swallowed up. Because while the goats are certainly not model examples of Christ's hospitality, it seems to me they are denied any chance of reconciliation or restoration. And the Jesus who's coming back seems a whole lot more like a vigilante than a righteous judge.

So...what to say?!? I could just discard this text, and assign it the same irredeemable qualities it assigns to those inhospitable goats. But that wouldn't

model God's sense of empathy, would it? So I keep asking myself, is this text really as harsh as it sounds on its face?

Maybe the whole second half of the text is a rhetorical device? Is there any possibility that the author is having Jesus speak in a sarcastic or ironic tone? But you, O inhospitable ones, you are gonna get it!!! Because you know me, I love that fire and brimstone – you are despicable, I can't even look at you.

Or maybe the harsh rhetoric is a venting session? We know that Matthew's fellowship was ostracized from the larger Jewish community because of their disagreement with others about the significance of Jesus's life and ministry. This is a wounded people; they've suffered the abuses of Rome's domination system AND the heartache of community fissure. Those who are spurned often ramp up their rhetoric, but saying isn't always doing. For instance, some years ago, Country Star Miranda Lambert wrote a hit song called Kerosene that reflected the feelings of a spurned lover: "Light 'em up and watch 'em burn; teach 'em what they need to learn, ha!" I'm grateful for the "ha" in that lyric, because it illustrates emotion, and hyperbole, and channeled lament. Maybe the Matthean community believed that harsh rhetoric would generate a sincere and repentant response from their abusers?

I suppose both of these theories are possible, but I'll present a more likely third alternative. Much like our prior two texts from Matthew 25, I think it's really important that we avoid applying an allegorical application and pursue a parabolic application to this lection. Where's the hidden meaning or truth in this story?

For me, I don't have to look very hard – the hidden truth hits me square between the eyes. On this, Reign of Christ Sunday, we, the ecumenical church lift up the Lordship of Christ over and above the Lordship of Caesar, particularly the kind of lordship that fashions itself in fascism and authoritarianism.

When the ruler or the judge returns, we are pleasantly surprised to learn that unlike Caesar, or Pharaoh, or other powerful monarchs, this ruler identifies with the most vulnerable. Therefore, to feed the hungry, and water the thirsty, and care for the infirmed, and visit the prisoner are to serve and honor the ruler.

Now I don't take issue with the text for admonishing goats who deny the image of God in the hungry, and the thirsty, and the infirmed, and the imprisoned, and in all who are vulnerable. We've got to work for a world where we refine our vision, not through the lenses of privilege, but instead through the lenses of love. Where I do take issue with today's text is in its likening of the character of the God of Creation with the character of earthly princes, and of retributive, spiteful judges.

Here's the hidden truth of today's parable: We expect God's justice to mimic Caesar's. The only difference between the two rulers is in the way justice is applied to different audiences. In Caesar's realm, the powerful will enjoy the loving side of justice, and the vulnerable will know its harsher edges. In God's realm we expect the inverse is true.

The truth is that we limit the possibilities of God's justice in the same way we limit the possibilities of God's grace; we've got to start believing that God is more imaginative, more creative, much more transcendent than each of us when it comes to such matters.

If we're in a rush, we can read the whole of Matthew 25 and understand the world as place of utter polarization: wise and foolish; prepared and unprepared; lazy and hardworking; righteous and unrighteous; first and last; best and least, sheep and goats. And it can get us all tied up in knots as we seek to convince ourselves, and our neighbors of why each one of us is wise, and prepared, and hardworking, and righteous, and first, and best, and sheepish, and oh-so-deserving of God's primary attention and status. And rather than caring about the whole of God's creation, and all the creatures that compose it, we only concern ourselves with ensuring we're at the top of the pyramid. That is to say, it's not the domination system that we're concerned about; it's just making sure that we aren't personally dominated.

But God's liberation is more complicated than making the last first and the least most. And the truth is it always has been. The Exodus didn't end with the humbling of Pharaoh; it also included a covenant of love for God and neighbor, and the promise of Jubilee. And Jesus tells a similar story. It's not just that the least and the last are gonna matter again; God's system of justice transcends Caesar's, because a person's value is not numeric or steeped in privilege. What

good is having the most, if all have enough? What good is being the first in line, if the person at the end of the line finds the same sense of satisfaction, the same boundless love, the same multitude of potential as the person at the beginning of the line? Caesar can only imagine a world ruled by diminishing returns. But lucky for each of us, God's not so short-sighted!!!

Jesus didn't come to Earth to make minor modifications to Caesar's faulty justice system, and he's certainly not coming back (assuming he already hasn't!) to define a more perfect union or help establish a more precise Bill of Rights.

Jesus came to us, in order that we might imagine, that we might redefine, that we might experience and participate in God's transcendent justice: Creation – Humanity, other creatures, and land – all living in accordance with God's decrees; mutual respect, mutual love, mutual neighboring, mutual distribution. In God's justice system, domination gives way to cooperation; scarcity gives way to abundance; impossibility gives way to possibility.

We begin the season of Advent next week. I think we would do well to stop hoping for the arrival of One who will reform systems to meet our liking, and to restore or ensure our privileges. And I think we would do even better to start hoping for the arrival of One who berthes new things, inspires new possibilities, and redefines our understanding of justice.

May it be so, and may it be soon! Amen.