

Believing & Acting with Eternal Hope

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Texts: Matthew 25: 31-46

At the appointed time the Promised One will come in glory, escorted by all the angels of heaven, and will sit up on the royal throne, with all the nations assembled below. Then the Promised One will separate them from one another, as a shepherd divides the sheep from the goats. The sheep will be placed on the right hand, the goats on the left.

The ruler will say to those on the right, 'Come, you blessed of my Abba God! Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world! For I was hungry, and you fed me; I was thirsty, and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me; naked and you clothed me. I was ill, and you comforted me; in prison and you came to visit me.' Then these just will ask, 'When did we see you hungry and feed you, or see you thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you as a stranger and invite you in or clothe you in your nakedness? When did we see you ill or in prison and come to visit you?' The ruler will answer them, 'The truth is, every time you did this for the least of my siblings, you did it for me.'

"Then the ruler will say to those on the left, 'Out of my sight, you accursed ones! In to that everlasting fire prepared for the Devil and the fallen angels! I was hungry, and you gave me no food; I was thirsty, and you gave me nothing to drink. I was a stranger and you gave me no welcome; naked and you gave me no clothing. I was ill and in prison and you did not come to visit me.' Then they in turn will ask, 'When did we see you hungry or thirsty, or homeless or naked, or ill or in prison, and not take care of you?' The answer will come, 'The truth is, as often as you neglected to do this to one of the least of these, you neglected to do it to me.' They will go off to eternal punishment, and the just will go off to eternal life."

The last time I really looked at this passage, I was facilitating a Sunday school class. We read this passage out loud together and then began to ask the kids questions about the sheep and the goats and what we thought Jesus was saying. One child raised their hand and said, "The sheep could be good people and the goats could be bad people. The good people get to go to heaven and the bad people go to hell."

Took me off guard to say the least and I peaked at the curriculum from the corner of my eye... nothing helpful...looked at my fellow facilitator who had a looked at me like you are the one in divinity school... meanwhile I am like Divinity school did not prepare me for this...

Then I just see a group of 6 first and second graders looking right up at me... Looking for a yes or no, a nod or something. I could sense anxiety growing in the air. It brought me back down memory lane... I remember going home after Sunday school when I was about their age, I went to my mom all terrified asking her about this thing called hell. Is God going to send me to hell or my family?

It was one of those moments that was a few seconds but felt like an hour.

I took a breath and responded with what I thought is possible... I said, I wonder if instead of good or bad people, Jesus might be talking about good and bad decisions. Sometimes we make good decisions and sometimes we make bad decisions.

We are human and make mistakes. Maybe we offer to help our parent take out the trash or set the table for dinner and then... sometimes we may say something mean to our sibling or friend because we are angry.

I wonder if Jesus is reminding us that our actions matter. So, I asked the kids, what do we think about that? I got some smiles and nods and giggles and class continued... with some confessions... taking a toy from a sibling... but also helping dad grocery shop...

I am grateful this moment happened, and I am grateful that one of the kids in the class was brave enough to share what was on their mind... perhaps something that we were all thinking about...

And I don't think the last sentence in the passage really helps - *They will go off to eternal punishment, and the just will go off to eternal life.* - "eternal punishment." Not something that really makes you breathe a sigh of relief.

For our time together today, I wanted to look more into this word, "eternal" because I remember coming across this word in Greek a few times in class.

Interestingly enough, when I looked up αἰώνιος in the Greek NT dictionary, I found "eternal" but then in parentheses -(of quality rather than of time).

Of quality rather than of time...

Is it possible then that there can be a different understanding, a different interpretation of what Jesus is talking about? Eternal punishment often gets associated with "hell" ... this afterlife place... this place we can go to later... later in time...as something that could last forever... a whole large sum of time...

But what if we instead focus on intensity over time, like this definition I found suggests... For me, it moves my mind away from the future and pushes me to think about the present. We witness Jesus talking about the kin-dom of God in this way, too...especially when he describes the kin-dom as not a place or time that we can point to, but as something that is around us and within us...

If eternal can mean intensity... then Jesus here could be talking about feeling intense punishment right in this moment... It is like when you lash out at a loved one because you are angry and then feel immense guilt afterwards. There can be this surge of intensity that we feel, and it does not feel good.

I offer this alternative definition of eternal as another window we can use to peer in from when looking at this passage. I ask that we hold on to this as we go back to look again at the passage. Jesus says,

*Inherit the kin-dom prepared for you from the creation of the world! For I was hungry, and you fed me; I was thirsty, and you gave me drink.
I was a stranger and you welcomed me; naked and you clothed me. I was ill, and you comforted me; in prison and you came to visit me.'*

Jesus is drawing our attention to ... and what we might also describe as essential to the work of the church...Feeding the hungry. Welcoming strangers, welcoming everyone to worship and fellowship. Clothing the naked. Comforting the sick. Visiting those incarcerated so that they are reminded that they are not forgotten.

All work that I see you, First Church, cherish and hold dear. I know I have only been here for a few months, but I could have just as confidently said this one week of being here. I see the passion, the love this community has and shares. I see the care put into this building – a building that is a home to– the shelter, Friday Café, Newtown School, AA gatherings, so many... especially during non-pandemic times.

Our faith is worship, it is prayer, it is holding onto hope, it is letting others hold on to hope when we cannot find it, it is caring for our neighbors, it is making music, it is justice work. – Our faith is believing, AND it is acting.

We see this divine call for action elsewhere in our scriptures. In the Letter of James for example:



