

“A Symphony of Ignorance”  
Matthew 25:31-46  
22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

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Westminster, Greenville  
Ben Dorr

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A number of years ago,  
one of my friends was at the supermarket—  
and on his list of groceries, items to buy, was BACON.

He was about to buy the bacon he usually buys, just your standard,  
run of the mill bacon...when something on another package of bacon  
caught his eye.

That package read:  
***“Sunday Bacon: The Bacon for Those Who Seek”...***

Well, this didn’t sound like your typical bacon, so he read a little  
further:

***“Seek Aroma... [our] bacon may attract uninvited guests and  
stimulate random acts of kindness among passing strangers.”***

Clearly, this was DIFFERENT bacon.  
But there was more.  
The packaging then read:

***“Seek Safe Smoke...protecting the earth’s atmosphere.”***

And then it said:

***“Seek Simplicity...our ingredient list is shorter than a haiku.”***

And THEN it said:

***“Seek Community...”***

Now—obviously this was an intentional marketing move to put all that on a package of bacon—but I’ve never forgotten it.

Bacon...leads to community?

I have no idea if that’s true,  
 but what I do know is that ALL OF US  
 are craving community these days.

It is perhaps the most common comment I’ve heard during the past 6 months:

It’s so good to be back in worship.  
 It’s so good to be with my church community.

**Our subject this morning is community.**

Now Jesus had something to say about community.  
 He didn’t mention bacon...but he did say this:

*“I was hungry and you gave me food,  
 I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink.”*

*“I was a stranger and you welcomed me,  
 I was naked and you gave me clothing.”*

*“I was sick and you took care of me,  
 I was in prison and you visited me.”*

Jesus is talking this morning about what it takes to build community. Not just any community...but a community that’s constructed in the image of Christ.

A community that pays attention to people on the margins.

To those whom it might be easy to forget.

The central question that today's text asks us is this:

***How far are we willing to go to build  
a more hospitable, generous, and just community?***

Now let me be the first to say that I believe Westminster has been answering this question for its entire existence.

I hear these words from Jesus today, and I think about our church's history of starting Meals on Wheels in Greenville, our many years of work with Habitat for Humanity.

I think about all the mission trips to the DR, or hosting families who experience homelessness through IHN, or becoming new friends with fellow Christians in Cuba.

I think about the recent men's mission trips to Camp Thornwell, renovating and rebuilding the camp there.

I think about our church's blossoming relationship with Soteria, helping those who have recently been released from prison re-integrate into society...it strikes me that Westminster Presbyterian Church knows all about the kind of community that Jesus describes in this parable.

What puzzles me is not how our church can respond faithfully to this parable. What puzzles me is the response of the sheep and the goats in this parable.

Did you notice what they say to Jesus?  
The exact same thing!

“Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you...that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?”

Please note: neither the sheep nor the goats have a clue that Jesus was among them!

As one commentator put it:

“Jesus’ story...is more than a peek at ethically correct behavior; it’s a concluding symphony of ignorance.”

So why would Jesus tell the parable this way?

What could possibly be the point of making sure that both the sheep and the goats are in the dark when it comes to seeing Jesus?

The only answer I can think of is this:

If you don’t know where Jesus is...could he be in this person, could he be in that person—then you’re left with a choice.

You can either make judgments about people, treating other people how you FEEL like treating them. Or...you can go through your life treating everyone like they had God inside of them.

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I’m reminded of a member of one of my former churches. She was a “fringe member” of the church—do you know what I mean?

On the rolls, but she rarely came to church.

Her husband came to church, and her daughter and son came to church.

Her parents were pillars of the church.  
But she almost never came to church.

I did hear, though, how she spent her weekends. She was known as the “flower lady”. She would go out into the streets, when it was late, and the bars were in full swing...and she would give flowers to people who lived on the street.

She would go to bars, and when someone was too intoxicated to make it home, she would help get them home. Call the taxi, pay for the fare. She knew the night, and people who only came out at night...and they knew her.

Sadly, she died very suddenly in a traffic accident one day.  
I was called to officiate at her funeral.  
I’ll never forget her funeral.  
It was not held in the church.  
But there were people from the church there, suits and ties, formal dresses.

And there were people from the streets there.  
And some of those people—people suffering from addiction, people experiencing homelessness—they were her pallbearers.

I’d never officiated at a funeral like it before.  
Rich and poor...same room.  
High and low...same room.

People whose lives society deemed “failure” at the same funeral as people whose lives were deemed “successful”.

This woman was loved by all classes and kinds of people and had made a difference in the lives of all sorts of people.

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Her life reminded me of our parable for today.  
 Not just the content of these words, but the PLACEMENT of  
 them.

In Matthew's Gospel, today's parable is the last story Jesus tells  
 his disciples before his death.

It's like his final sermon.  
 His last lecture.  
 It's the culmination of all his teaching in the Gospel of Matthew.

Let me put it like this.  
 How many of you have ever been in school?  
 How many of you, when you were in school, ever asked, "Teacher,  
 is what you're teaching today—is this going to be on the final exam?"

That's what we got this morning.  
 Jesus just told us that when all is said and done, THIS is what will  
 be on the final exam.

The final exam is not simply how did we love our family, or were  
 we a good friend.

Jesus ASSUMES that we'll love our family and friends.  
 The final exam, says Jesus, is about *the way we live in community*.

Maybe, as we seek to build the community Jesus wants us to build,  
 it would be helpful to ask ourselves a few questions:

Who, in my own life, constitutes "the least of these"?

Who am I least likely to get to know?  
 Who do I never make connections with?  
 Who believes different things than me?  
 Who swims in different circles than me?

### **Who am I least likely to love?**

I wonder if this question, this final exam question—who am I least likely to love, and how can we be a part of the same community—I wonder if this was on Jesus’ mind when he called his first disciples. We hear a lot about Peter and James and John...but there were other fascinating people whom Jesus called to build his community:

Simon the Zealot on the one hand.  
 Levi the tax collector on the other hand.

Those two people wouldn’t have been able to STAND one another!

But Jesus made them part of the same community.

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During the first three years that Anthony Ray Hinton spent on death row for two murders that he did not commit, Hinton was furious with God.

You see, Hinton had grew up with a religious mother—  
 his mother’s faith shaped his own faith.

His mother believed in a God who sat high but looked low.  
 And his mother also believed in going to church.  
 She raised her son Anthony with this rule:

As long as you live in my house, you have to go to church.

Now the church that his mother went to, it was a Baptist church, and they spent a lot of time in that church, especially on Sundays. One day as a young boy, Hinton said to his mother, “It ought to be against the law to take your children to church at 9 in the morning, and keep them there until 5 in the evening!”

But Hinton’s mother would not budge.  
And she wouldn’t budge on something else.

As a boy, Hinton would say his prayers at night, and one time his mother stood behind him. Young Anthony prayed for his family, and said “Amen,” and his mother said, “That prayer is unacceptable!”

“Mom, what are you talking about?”

She said, “I did not hear you pray for anyone other than your own family.”

“Mom, don’t I have a right to pray to God and ask God to bless who I want God to bless?”

She said, “Not in this house. Son, if I’ve taught you nothin’, I want you to pray for your enemies. I want you to pray for everybody.”

And his mother made him get back down on his knees and pray again. And when he got done praying a second time, his mother said to him:

“Son, there will be people who dislike you simply because of the color of your skin. People that hate you, you haven’t done anything to them...those are the ones I want you to learn to love, to pray for.”

So one day years later, when Hinton was on death row, a new prisoner arrived.

This prisoner's name was Henry Francis Hayes.  
He was on death row for a lynching, a crime he committed as a member of the Ku Klux Klan.

But Anthony Ray Hinton didn't know this when Hayes moved into the cell next to him.

Hayes said, "My name is Henry."  
Hinton said, "My name is Ray."  
And every day, they talked, and talked and talked.

One day, another Black inmate asked Hinton, "Do you know who you're talking to every day?"

"Henry."  
"Man, that's not just Henry. That's Henry the Ku Klux Klansman."

And Anthony Ray Hinton says—*I had to ask myself a profound question: does it matter?*

Does it matter who Henry Hayes has been?  
Does it matter why he's here, when it comes to how I treat him?

And Hinton called upon the faith he learned from his mother as a young boy, and decided it didn't matter.

And the two men commenced to build a friendship.

It became such a strong friendship that Henry Hayes looked forward every day to talking with Ray, spending time with Ray. One day, Henry's father came to visit, and Henry introduced him to Ray.

But Henry's father refused to shake Ray's hand.

Later that evening, Henry was embarrassed, ashamed, but Anthony Ray Hinton told him, "If your father wants to die of the cancer of hate, let him die...you don't have that cancer. You introduced me to your father—the man who taught you to hate—as your friend!"

When it came time for Hayes to be executed by the state of Alabama, Anthony Ray Hinton said to Henry Hayes:

"Henry, getting to know you has been nothing but a joy.

To which Henry replied, "All of my life, I was taught to hate...and you changed all of that."

Anthony Ray Hinton was exonerated in 2015 and set free.

He says that even though the state of Alabama never offered any kind of apology, he's forgiven those who were determined to put him to death.

"If I had to tell you why God allowed me to go to death row," says Hinton, "it was because He wanted me to show Henry what real love felt like, what real love looked like..."<sup>1</sup>

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Of course, that's not just Anthony Ray Hinton's job.

That's the Church's job.

To build bridges of love across waters of ignorance, and apathy, and poverty and injustice and hate.

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony Ray Hinton, interviewed on Kelly Corrigan's podcast, "Wonders," September 28, 2021.

So, I've got a homework assignment for you.

I'd like you to spend some time later today considering a relationship with a person in your life, a person whom it is really difficult for you to love.

Spend some time considering the person who, every time you're with them, they try your patience, get under your skin, offend you, and you'd rather just avoid them entirely.

And then consider how you're going to build a bridge with them. How you're going to be part of a community that INCLUDES them.

Consider the possibility that even Jesus might be hiding, in your relationship with them.

Now I know...you might be wondering if you really have to do this homework assignment.

You might be wondering if it's going to be on the final exam.

I don't know.

I'm not the teacher, I'm a student like you.

Jesus is the one who will administer the final exam.

I suppose that you and I can take a chance that the relationships we have or fail to have with the people in our lives who are difficult for us to love...we can take a chance that these relationships will not be on the final exam. After hearing this morning's parable, do we really want to take that chance?

Amen.