

**Matthew 25:31-46**

<sup>31</sup>“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. <sup>32</sup>All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, <sup>33</sup>and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. <sup>34</sup>Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; <sup>35</sup>for 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, <sup>36</sup>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.’ <sup>37</sup>Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? <sup>38</sup>And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? <sup>39</sup>And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ <sup>40</sup>And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ <sup>41</sup>Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; <sup>42</sup>for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, <sup>43</sup>I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ <sup>44</sup>Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ <sup>45</sup>Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ <sup>46</sup>And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

*Lord, open the eyes of our hearts by the power of your Spirit, that we may know the hope to which we have been called in Jesus Christ.  
Amen.*

So what did the sheep and goats have in common?

They didn’t recognize Jesus!

They didn’t know Jesus would be found in the hungry and thirsty, in the stranger and the one with no clothes, in the sick and in the prisoner. The goats didn’t get it; the sheep didn’t get it either.

So what’s the difference between the sheep and the goats in this parable? Perhaps it is simply that the people symbolized by the sheep recognized human need, whereas the goats must have been preoccupied with other things.

Or could it be that the sheep recognized that the one suffering was just like them; human, fallible, broken and longing for human touch? Can we identify with *the other*? Can we see ourselves in the other? Can we walk a mile in the others shoes? Can we see our own

humanness in the one who is hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick, or in prison? What’s ultimately the difference between us and the one in need? Our birth? Our genes? Privilege and opportunity? Luck? Why did I grow up in a loving home and not as a homeless child?

“We are all the same,” the Dali Lama often says. As Christians we know we are *all* God’s children, and God loves us all. Thus there is holiness in all of us; holiness in the CEO and the janitor, holiness in the head chef and the dishwasher, holiness in the billionaire and the homeless child. There is holiness in all of us.

Father Henri Nouwen met a man named Adam at the L’Arche Daybreak community in Toronto, Canada. Adam had profound developmental disabilities, and could do almost nothing for himself. Henri, who spent the last 10 years of his life at Daybreak, was paired with Adam and took care of him. Nouwen said that Adam was the weakest among that very diverse Daybreak community, yet he was the peacemaker and held the community together; for they all shared in Adam’s care. Nouwen saw Christ at work in and through Adam; he was a gift to the whole community.

As children of God we are made in the likeness of Christ. I’d like to share another parable that illustrates this reality.

**THE DYING ORDER AND THE RABBI**

Once a great order, as a result of waves of anti-monastic persecution in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the rise of secularism in the nineteenth, all its branch houses were lost and it had become decimated to the extent that there were only five monks left in the decaying mother house: the abbot and four others, all over seventy in age. Clearly it was a dying order.

In the deep woods surrounding the monastery there was a wise old Rabbi’s hermitage. The monks, tuned to the Spirit’s guiding through years of prayer and meditation, could sense when the Rabbi was at the hermitage for retreat. The monks would whisper to each other, “The Rabbi is in the woods...the Rabbi is in the woods.”

On one occasion of their sensing the Rabbi’s presence, the monks urged their father abbot to go speak with the Rabbi, for perhaps he may have some wisdom concerning the life of their monastery.

The Rabbi welcomed the abbot at his hut. But when the abbot explained the purpose of his visit, the Rabbi could only commiserate with him: “I know how it is,” he exclaimed. “The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in all the nearby towns. So the old abbot and the Rabbi commiserated together.

The time came when the abbot had to leave. They embraced each other. “It has been a wonderful thing that we should meet after all these years,” the abbot said, “but I have still failed in my purpose for coming here. Is there nothing you can tell me, no piece of advice you can give me that would help me save my dying order?” “No, I am sorry,” the Rabbi responded. “I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you.”

When the abbot returned to the monastery his fellow monks gathered around him to ask, “Well what did the Rabbi say?” “He couldn’t help,” the abbot answered. “We just commiserated and read the scriptures together. The only thing he did say, just as I was leaving — it was something cryptic — was that the Messiah is one of us. I don’t know what he meant.”

In the days and weeks and months that followed, the old monks pondered these words and wondered whether there was any possible significance. The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us monks here at the monastery? If that’s the case, which one?

Do you suppose he meant the abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant the Abbot. He has been our leader for more than a generation. On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly Brother Thomas is a holy man. Everyone knows that Thomas is a man of light.

Certainly he could not have meant Brother Elred! Elred gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even though he is a thorn in people’s sides, when you look back on it, Elred is virtually always right. Often very right. Maybe the Rabbi did mean Brother Elred.

But surely not Brother Phillip. Phillip is so passive, a real nobody. But then, almost mysteriously, he has a gift for somehow always

being there when you need him. He just magically appears by your side. Maybe Phillip is the Messiah.

Of course the Rabbi didn’t mean me. He couldn’t possibly have meant me. I’m just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? O God, not me. I couldn’t be that much for You, could I?

As they contemplated in this manner, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one among them might be the Messiah. And on the off, off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.

Because the forest in which it was situated was beautiful, it so happened that people still occasionally came to visit the monastery to picnic on its tiny lawn, to wander along some of its paths, even now and then to go into the dilapidated chapel to meditate. As they did so, without even being conscious of it, they sensed the aura of extraordinary respect that now began to surround the five old monks and seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of the place. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling, about it.

Hardly knowing why, they began to come back to the monastery more frequently to picnic, to play, to pray. They began to bring their friends to show them this special place. And their friends brought their friends.

Then it happened that some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the old monks. After a while one asked if he could join them; then another...and another. So within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order and, thanks to the Rabbi’s gift, a vibrant center of light and spirituality in the realm.

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Made in the likeness of Christ, we are gift bearers; even the least among us is gifted. So what are the gifts? Our gifts are all different, and yet they are all the same...LIFE; our gift is our life. It’s what brought the monastery back from its path to extinction.

You, my dear friends, have given yourselves to me in more ways than I can count. Because of you I am not the same person who came here 8 years ago, not even close. Your gifts of self have come to me in generosity and affirmation. Perhaps your best gifts have come in critique and correction. We have shared both deep grief, and ecstatic joy; both priceless gifts. In the day to day sharing of our lives we have been gift for each other.

For the blessings of your patience, I give you thanks. For your acceptance of who I was and who I have become, I give your thanks. For seeing God's call in me, and trusting me to be your pastor and teacher, I give you thanks. All these things are gifts of life, and prove you are made in the likeness of Christ.

So let us all continue to look for the Christ in each other, in our neighbor, in the hungry, in the thirsty, in the stranger, in the naked, in the sick, and in the prisoner, for if we can see Christ in the other, we will know just what to do, and we will know the gift we must offer... as St. Francis is known to have prayed, *For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; it is in dying that we are born again to eternal life.*

Let us pray:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy.

O, Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love; For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; it is in dying that we are born again to eternal life. Amen.