

**LAKEWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

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**ARE YOU AN EXTREMIST?**

**Matthew 25:31-40**

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Back when I was still working with youth a lot, I showed a short movie at a retreat entitled, *The Visitor*. The lead character was the owner of a general store in a small community. While he was in deep spiritual meditation, he was overcome with the idea that Jesus promised to come and visit him in his store on a *particular day*. Anticipating the visit with great joy, the day finally arrived, and so he went about the business of the day, *constantly expecting to see Jesus*. However, the day ended up as just another normal day. Late that night, in his prayers, the store owner *complained* that the promise of Jesus' appearance had not happened.

Then the answer came. He heard the voice of Jesus say, "*Do you recall when the lady in the walker arrived in the store and you assisted her and gave particular kindness in gathering her groceries and helping her to the car? I was there. I was that woman.*"

Jesus continued, "*Do you remember the gentleman that came in to the store and, in the midst of the cold of winter, he needed to have his car jumped because the battery was dead? You closed the store for a short time so you could assist him. I was that gentleman.*"

"*Remember that mother with the small boy who was causing her to be distracted in her shopping, and you took the time to sit and talk with the child so the mother could be unencumbered as she moved through the store? I was there.*"

"*Yes, in all of these I WAS A STRANGER and you welcomed me.*"



The Scripture lesson today is a familiar one. We've all heard about the separation of the *sheep* and the *goats*. **Allow me to remind you of FOUR BASIC REALITIES in this scripture lesson:**

**1)** The STRANGER is JESUS. In Matthew 25:35, very directly Jesus declares, "*I was a stranger and you welcomed me.*"

**2)** In verse 32 we read the statement, "*All the nations will be gathered before him*". The implication is that there are *believers* and *faithful followers* of Jesus in ALL nations. There is *no geographical isolation*.

**3)** Clearly there will be a division between the *sheep* and the *goats*. However, neither the *sheep* nor the *goats* know *WHY* they are placed in a particular category. *The STRANGER is the only one who knows*.

**4)** And finally, the assumption is made that those who RECEIVED THE STRANGER showed a CAPACITY to LOVE that went *beyond their own selfish interests*. And again, the decision as to WHO is accepted is left to ONE ... and that is the STRANGER ... JESUS.

Over my lifetime, and possibly it's true for you as well, all the time I have spent on judging ... trying to decide *who the sheep are* and *who the goats are* ... well, it just hasn't been very productive. All that it's done for me is to *enhance* the *prejudices* that I've held. *Judging others* has made ME feel more comfortable about being an INSIDER

as *I've decided* WHO the *OUTSIDERS* are. **However, I've got to say here, that in NO WAY has any judgment ever ENHANCED my CAPACITY to LOVE. In fact, it has DONE JUST THE OPPOSITE.**



**Matthew's gospel makes it very clear that WE are NOT the ones who will decide.** Bishop John Shelby Spong, in his book, *The Sins of Scripture (The Sins of Scripture, page 163)*, states:

“Matthew is the author who gives us this story of the final judgment that is to come at the last day, when the *Son of Man* arrives in his glory to judge the nations by separating the sheep from the goats. The sheep are rewarded by this judge with entry into the kingdom of God, which was “*prepared for you from the foundation of the world*” (vs. 34). The goats, on the other hand, are condemned to the eternal flames. It is interesting to note that the standard by which both are judged has nothing to do with proper believing or creedal orthodoxy. It has to do rather with how well or how poorly each nation, and by implication each person within that nation, perceives the presence of the “*Son of Man*” in the faces of the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the dispossessed and the imprisoned.”

And so, we are simply called to love and show kindness to the stranger. For Jesus said, “*I was a stranger and you welcomed me.*”

**The implication in this conclusion is: We are called to GROW in our CAPACITY to LOVE ... and THIS ALONE is PLEASING to the STRANGER.**

**Folks, the Jesus that I have come to know over the years refuses to be defined by our limited boundaries and our desire to domesticate him so that he fits comfortably into the values, mores, and societal norms that are familiar to us.**

Here's what I think we've done to God. In our very limited understanding of who God is, there has been this meager attempt on our part to define God in such a way the God becomes *OUR* patron saint. We quote scripture in order to affirm *OUR beliefs, OUR desires* with the assumption that God hates those that *WE* hate and loves those that *WE* love. **The reality is that such a domestication of Jesus CANNOT be supported in any way through Scripture. Jesus is the STRANGER who comes and he is SURROUNDED by scandals.**



Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest who serves as adjunct professor of Christian spirituality at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, one of our denomination's seminaries, makes the same point in the following paragraph:

“Jesus is terrible at meeting people's expectations of him. He engages the sorts of people he should ignore and ignores the sorts of people he should engage. He accepts the wrong dinner invitations. He is rude to respected religious leaders. He scolds his own disciples, while he praises the faith of a Roman soldier. Is this the kind of person you want teaching [at Lakewood Presbyterian Church]? He is impossible to manage. He will not stay in role. Every time his handlers think they have him handled, he vanishes from their midst.”



From our own Presbyterian history, John Calvin, the father of the Presbyterian Church, ruled with an *IRON FIST* in Geneva. It was obvious that Calvin and his followers knew *exactly* who should be *inside* and who should be *outside*. *It is NOT one of our highest moments in Presbyterianism*. Listen to this list of things that were forbidden and then to some of the *penalties* inflicted upon those who dared to step *beyond the bounds* back in Calvin's day.

**First the FORBIDDEN stuff:**

*IN CHURCHES* there would be *NO* feasting, dancing, singing, pictures, statues, religious relics, church bells, organs, or altar candles.

And for the *COMMON FOLK* in everyday life, *NO* "indecent or irreligious" songs; staging or attending theatrical plays; wearing jewelry and rough, lace or "immodest" dress; speaking disrespectfully of your betters; extravagant entertainment, swearing, gambling, playing cards, hunting and drunkenness; naming children after anyone but figures in the Old Testament; and reading "immoral or irreligious" books.

Quite the list I must say.

**Now some examples of the PENALTIES:**

A father who christened his son Claude, a name not found in the Old Testament, spent four days in jail, as did a woman whose hairdo reached an "immoral" height. The session of one church beheaded a child who struck his parents. They drowned any single woman found pregnant. And in separate incidents, Calvin's own stepson and daughter-in-law were executed when found in bed with their lovers.

★ **Friends, my Jesus is the "STRANGER" who keeps calling us to *grow* in our CAPACITY TO LOVE, not in our *capacity* to *alienate*, *build barriers* and *condemn* those who disagree with us.**



Bishop Leonard Kelly, the former African-American bishop of the United Methodist church, says, "*If you want people to STAY where they are PUT ... DON'T tell them about Jesus.*"

**SO IT IS WITH ALL OF US.**

If we just want to *stay put*, then we had better *stop talking* about Jesus, because implied in the very nature of the biblical text and its message is that: "*Followers of Jesus CHANGE ... they GROW in their CAPACITY to LOVE.*"

***That means that they LOVE OUTSIDERS and the OUTSIDERS BECOME INSIDERS.***



**Suffice it to say, that often it is the STRANGER, the OUTSIDER, who calls us to grow in our CAPACITY to LOVE.** Let me to give you a few brief examples of this from the Old Testament and then the New:

*In Genesis 12 there is the Covenant with Abraham.* God says he will bless Abraham's family and make of them a great nation so that they will be a blessing to ALL people and ALL nations.

***There is NO ISOLATIONISM in this covenant.***

*You know Jonah.* The whole story centers on God calling Jonah to change his hateful attitude and be more compassionate in reaching out in love to the Ninevites, who were non-Jews. The story has interesting implications because these *nonbelievers/outside*rs find Jonah sleeping and ask him to pray to his God. Later the

*nonbelievers* pray to the God in whom Jonah said he believed, and scripture tells us they became believers.

***OUTSIDERS challenged Jonah to expand his CAPACITY to LOVE.***

*How about Ruth?* Ruth was a Moabitess, a member of a detestable race, born and raised in paganism. One day a family moved into Ruth's life, a family of believers. That's all the detail I'll give for now ... read the book of Ruth, it is a moving story of love and commitment. But you see, the scriptures of the Old Testament tell us that no Moabitess could ever be a part of the lineage of the Israelite people. Yet, we trace the genealogy of Jesus through King David and back to Ruth, the Moabitess.

***Another OUTSIDER bringing the message of God's LOVE to ALL.***

*In the New Testament, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John speak exclusively about the stranger ... Jesus.* And folks, Jesus, in everything he does, is calling us to move beyond our limited boundaries and to realize that his love goes far beyond our wildest expectations. Those *we would exclude* are *INCLUDED*.

***He calls us to grow in our CAPACITY to LOVE.***

*The Book of Acts* introduces us to the expansive nature of the church, from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria, to the uttermost parts of the world. It tells us the story of Phillip meeting the Ethiopian eunuch, a black man from Africa who is baptized. He is received into the Christian church even though the Old Testament says no eunuch will ever be a part of the Kingdom of God.

***An OUTSIDER becomes an INSIDER.***

*Paul, who was first named Saul,* is called by God from persecution of Christians to be the missionary advocate who would include you and me, as Gentiles, into God's plan.

***God chooses an OUTSIDER named Annanias, a STRANGER, to convey God's message to Paul.***

*Peter, the Rock,* is given a vision to break down his barriers, prejudices, pre-conceived notions.

***And a Roman, Gentile centurion, yes another OUTSIDER, is God's ambassador to tell Peter not to call anything unclean that God, through Christ, declares clean.***

YOU and I could tell our stories and give our testimonies as to how God has come to us through *STRANGERS* and *OUTSIDERS*.

Through circumstances in our lives where we were closed, God called us to open up the gates of our hearts so that God's love might flow in.

Each of our testimonies, I believe, would reflect that as our *CAPACITY to LOVE* Jesus Christ [the *STRANGER*] increases, people that we had excluded are *INCLUDED*. We realize they have a message of love, just as much as we have LOVE to share with them.

***As the passage from Matthew declares: No one but Jesus, the stranger, knows who the goats are and who the sheep are. That's NOT our business. OUR business is to GROW in our CAPACITY to LOVE and be FAITHFUL to the ONE who LOVES us.***



**So what is the challenge for us on this summer Sunday?** I think it is best expressed in a statement the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. made in a letter he wrote while incarcerated in the Birmingham city jail:

Was not the reformer Martin Luther an *EXTREMIST*? “*Here I stand, I can do no other, so help me God.*”

Was not John Bunyan an *EXTREMIST*? “*I will stay in jail until the end of my days before I make a butchery of my conscience.*”

Was not Abraham Lincoln an *EXTREMIST*? “*This nation cannot survive half-slave and half-free.*”

Was not Thomas Jefferson an *EXTREMIST*? “*We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal.*”

So the question is not whether we will *BE* an *EXTREMIST*, but what *KIND OF EXTREMIST WILL WE BE?* Will we be an *EXTREMIST* for *HATE*, or will we be an *EXTREMIST* for *LOVE*?

**I don't know exactly where God through Christ, the *STRANGER*, is calling you to *GROW* and become an *EXTREMIST* in your *CAPACITY* to *LOVE*. You know that, just as I do ... *in the innermost part of our hearts.***

**So let me give you this challenge. Make a promise to the *STRANGER*, Jesus, that next week when you return to this sanctuary you will have grown in your *CAPACITY* to *LOVE*.**

***You will not stay put.***

**And when you return next week you will be able to say, “Jesus, I have *GROWN* in my *CAPACITY* to *LOVE* ... as you, in your life, your work and your spirit have commanded me to do.”**

**If that can happen, then I believe you will hear the *STRANGER*, Jesus, say to *YOU*, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink...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.”**



***Are you an *EXTREMIST*?***

***What kind of *EXTREMIST* will you be?***

***Amen and Amen.***