

Hearing God's Word Proclaimed

Can you tell a Christian from a distance?

Rev. Kathryn Kibbie Laird

Matthew 25:31-46

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The Sheep and the Goats "When Jesus finally arrives, blazing in beauty and all his angels with him, the Son of Man will take his place on his glorious throne. Then all the nations will be arranged before him and he will sort the people out, much as a shepherd sorts out sheep and goats, putting sheep to his right and goats to his left. "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Enter, you who are blessed by my Father! Take what's coming to you in this kingdom. It's been ready for you since the world's foundation. And here's why:

I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you gave me a drink, I was homeless and you gave me a room, I was shivering and you gave me clothes, I was sick and you stopped to visit, I was in prison and you came to me.

"Then those 'sheep' are going to say, 'Master, what are you talking about? When did we ever see you hungry and feed you, thirsty and give you a drink? And when did we ever see you sick or in prison and come to you?' Then the King will say, 'I'm telling the solemn truth: Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me—you did it to me.' "Then he will turn to the 'goats,' the ones on his left, and say, 'Get out, worthless goats! You're good for nothing but the fires of hell. And why? Because—

I was hungry and you gave me no meal, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was homeless and you gave me no bed, I was shivering and you gave me no clothes, sick and in prison, and you never visited.'

"Then those 'goats' are going to say, 'Master, what are you talking about? When did we ever see you hungry or thirsty or homeless or shivering or sick or in prison and didn't help?' "He will answer them, 'I'm telling the solemn truth: Whenever you failed to do one of these things to someone who was being overlooked or ignored, that was me—you failed to do it to me.' "Then those 'goats' will be herded to their eternal doom, but the 'sheep' to their eternal reward."

Let us pray: Holy and Gracious God, this morning we come to hear your word, and the gospel is a challenging word indeed. You ask us to take an honest look at our lives and evaluate if we are walking the talk or just talking a big game. Lord, even though we are just single individuals, collectively we can make a difference in the suffering of this world. Empower us with your Holy Spirit to be doers of your Word and not just hearers only. As we leave here this morning, help us be living examples of Christ's love in this world which so desperately needs hope and encouragement. Lord Jesus Christ we are all in very different places in our lives. Some are in sunshiny places, some struggle to make sense of it all, and some live under the shadow of fear and doubt and depression. Speak to us right where we are. To that end, O God, please pour through me the gift of preaching that by some miracle of your grace, my words might somehow become your word, your life giving word for us this day. And we believe that they will, for it is in the name of your Son our Lord and Savior that we pray, Amen.

During the early part of my senior year in high school, I did not know where I wanted to go to college. I had a vague idea of getting out of the blazing Texas heat, and a romantic vision of the Northeast, with ivy covered buildings, snow, and beautifully quaint New England towns, but like many high school seniors, I was still searching for the place I would call home for four years when I began to apply to colleges.

I remember working on college entrance essays over Thanksgiving break. While everyone else was eating too much turkey, and tossing the football, I tried to craft the perfect essay.

One question I remember most was "if you could do an internship with anyone in the world,

alive or dead, who would it be and why?" I thought about my pediatrician, who was always able to fix my aches and pains. Sore throats, poison ivy, even chicken pox, Dr. Scroggie was the man. For a brief moment, I considered Jesus, but then decided people might think I was a Jesus freak. So, I picked a benevolent figure who was politically correct.

I decided that more than anyone else in the world, I wanted to do an internship with Santa Claus. I wrote about the importance of having dreams and holding on to the deep desires of one's soul, and believing in the good in people, about helping the poor and bringing toys and food to the needy, and most of all delivering a message of peace and hope to the world. At the age of eighteen

I had a clear vision that things were not alright in the world, and we needed hope and encouragement and vision to get us to the place where things were supposed to be.

I returned from Thanksgiving vacation, passed in the essay, and watched my English teacher rip it to shreds. “Forget it,” she sneered, “They will never accept this essay. You cannot write about someone make believe. This will never fly. Forget it. You want to go to an all women’s college, like Mount Holyoke, pick a feminist, any feminist and write about equality for women.”

My second choice was Helen Gurley Brown, editor of Cosmopolitan magazine, a woman I knew nothing about, but I wrote about how women need to be in leadership roles, and how I would love to attend an all women’s college that was dedicated to the excellence of women’s academics and athletics.

This past month as I prayed about our gospel text for this Sunday, and wrestled with its message, I kept remembering this college essay, and how this was the first time I can remember being formally asked “what do you want to do when you grow up? Who do you want to be?”

As a theologian, I often get to talk to people about where they feel God is calling them. Perhaps they don’t have the language to describe it that way, but in my mind, when people begin to articulate a gut feeling or a deep desire to do something or help out and serve in a certain way, I know that they are responding to a prompting of the Holy Spirit.

I believe that God calls us to be followers and disciples of Jesus Christ, and for each one of us that journey takes a different path. I know some hedge fund people in this community who live out the Christian calling to serve by helping others plan investments for their families. I know some wonderful surgeons in this community who have answered the call to serve as Christians by caring for the health of those who need medical care. I know some loving teachers in this church who have answered the call to serve Christ by devoting themselves to teaching students. **No matter what vocation we have, our calling is to be Christ-like as we carry out our work.**

In my mind, explaining this concept is one of the biggest challenges when teaching confirmation class. In many ways, we have asked how does being a Christian affect your life? How

does being a Christian direct how you act, speak, and live on a daily basis? The passage we read this morning was the theme of our confirmation retreat, and is known as the parable of the sheep and the goats. It is a tough parable, because it makes us face some hard realities about our lives. **Do we walk the talk? Or do we just talk a big game?**

In this passage from Matthew, Jesus divides the sheep from the goats. The sheep hear and follow the shepherd. The goats do not. Their separation represents the last judgment where we will all be asked to account for our sins. In the end, our actions do matter to God.

The epistle of James puts it this way: “Be doers of the Word and not hearers only” (1:22). Isn’t that what God is asking us, in a nutshell, to be Christ-like no matter what our vocation is and not be hypocrites.

Think of it this way: Bostonians are by definition, those who live and dwell in Boston. Some generalizations are true—Bostonians love the Red Sox and Fenway park, they live in Bean town, they can endure harsh winters, and they have distinct accents and say funny things like “wicked,” such as that is “wicked cool.” Austonians are by definition, those who live and dwell in Austin. Some generalizations are true—they love the Texas Longhorns, know how to make the sign “hook ‘em horns” from a young age and eat Mexican food and BBQ almost exclusively. They say things like, “are all of ya’ll going to that party, cuz BA-ayyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy and I are going? And it’s gonna be so muuuch fuuuuuuun.

Christians are by definition, those who live or dwell in Christ. Christians, or Christ-ians, seek to follow Christ’s path of service and ministry. You can usually spot a Christian from a distance, though some are more obvious than others. True Christians do not just pay lip service to Jesus, they seek to make the kingdom of heaven that Jesus so often spoke of, an earthly reality.

Twenty years ago, if I had taken the risk I was not willing to take, and I had written an essay about interning with Jesus Christ, it might have included the following day: “wake up early with Jesus, go to the garden and pray. Center ourselves on God and plan out the day. Ask God for direction about how to navigate the day. Next, make a fish breakfast on the beach with the disciples and settle a

dispute about who is greatest. Heal a leper, cast out some demons, and stop for lunch at Jacob's well. Tell the Samaritan woman who is gathering water from the well that she should not be sleeping around so much and convince her that U-turns are perfectly okay in life especially when you are headed in the wrong direction. Sit down in the shade with the disciples for lunch. Cool our heels in town while we regroup, and then get up and go feed 5,000 people with a young boy's lunch of bread and fish. Afterwards, get up on a grassy hill and witness one of the most beautiful speeches the world has ever known. Before dark, teach Peter to walk on water, and for dinner, teach the disciples a thing or two about washing other people's feet. Throughout the day, keep God apprised of the day as it develops and ask for direction and helpful hints. Instead of waiting for all else to fail, start with prayer.

To tell you the truth, the internship with Jesus sounds a little tiring. No wonder I chose Santa first and the feminist second. Yet, each of us has signed up for a Christian internship for the rest of our lives.

So, what is Christ's vision for us and for our world? What would a day in the life of the kingdom of God look like today? First, Christ's vision for us is one of community and connectedness. Edward Hallowell, a senior lecturer at Harvard medical school says that all human beings need to be connected. We need to know that we are a part of something that matters, and that we matter as a part of that community. Each one of us needs face-to-face interactions; we need to be seen and known and loved, and we need to do these same things for others.ⁱ

The Hebrew prophets have a word for this connectedness of all things—shalom—"the webbing together of God, humans, and all creation."

In God's vision shalom would prevail. As one theologian put it: All marriages would be healthy, respectful, and life giving. All children would be safe and nurtured. Those who have too much would give to those who have too little. Israeli and Palestinian children would play together and be friends on the West Bank; their parents would build homes for one another. In offices and boardrooms, employers would ask colleagues how their lives are going, and mean it. They would compliment their colleagues behind their backs, and

freely lavish praise on them because everyone needs an encouraging word. Tabloids would be filled with tales of great courage and moral beauty.

Disagreements would be settled with grace and civility. Doors would have no locks; cars would have no alarms. Schools would no longer need police presence or even hall monitors; students and janitors and teachers would honor and value each other's work. At recess, all kids would get picked for a team and no one would get beat up. People would neither be hurried or bored. No father or mother would ever again say, "I am too busy" to a disappointed child. Our national sleep deficit would be paid off. Starbucks would still exist, but they would only serve decaf.

Every time one person came in contact with another it would be to express encouragement, affection, love, and delight. No one would be afraid or lonely. People would gather in communities of faith, as God intended. And at the center of every community would be the marvelous architect of it all, God the creator, redeemer, and sustainer of the universe, whose presence fills each person and every living thing. This is God's vision for our world.ⁱⁱ This is God's shalom.

I want to say something very personal to the confirmands. Following God in Jesus Christ is not easy. Christianity is not the easy way. It is easy to sit home and watch TV. It is easy to go down the Avenue and buy stuff. Pledging your life to Christ is not easy. But I will promise you this—it is a life rich with blessing and a path that will satisfy you beyond your wildest imaginings. You will meet people and go places because you are a Christian. You will experience the face of God in those you serve, your life will have moments of holiness, and you will know God's presence deep in your soul no matter what life brings. Today you join this family of the people of God. We will walk with you, and you with us. We will pray for you, and you for us. We will serve side by side to bring about the kingdom of heaven. We will be family to each other. As God says to all who have chosen life, "welcome home, good and faithful servant, welcome home." In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

ⁱ Ortberg, John. *Everybody is Normal Till You Get to Know Them*. p. 19.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.* pp 19-20.