

GOING TO PARADISE  
[written in oral form]

Matthew 25:31-46  
Reign of Christ & Memorial Sunday

November 22, 2020  
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Today is the last day of the liturgical year. It is called the reign of Christ Sunday. Next Sunday is the first Sunday of Advent, and the beginning of a new church year.  
Today is also our Memorial Sunday.

Endings are often measurable points for reflection. That is why Memorial Sunday is today.

The lectionary readings also present points for measuring... that prompt deep reflection.

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Today's Gospel text is one of my favourite passages to weaponize.

I have used it on those who assert Jesus was the unblemished lamb who was sacrificed by God to pay off our sins. That theology tends to disregard or diminish most of Jesus' teaching and examples.

They would declare that the Gospels are just to show that Jesus was without sin. Therefore, the perfect sacrifice pays our way into eternal life. One merely has to "believe it" and claim it to get a ticket to heaven.

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When confronted by such people, *and I have been confronted*, I slyly whip out this text. I ask them to explain the message to me, and then I point out that this is JESUS stating the criteria for divine discernment.

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Rarely does it change their opinion, but at least it quiets them, and... .. leaves me with a smile. Okay, it's more of a smirk.

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For the most part, I think we Mennonites support / embrace this message in Matthew 25. We tend to put great value on our actions in relation to the life of Jesus.

I just hope we understand the spiritual implications, too.

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This text is a parable in the genre of the Jewish apocalyptic tradition. In those days, they did not have Grimm's Fairy Tales or Walt Disney. Instead, they told good stories that often included animals, such as sheep and goats.

In this story, Jesus does not allow room for excuses or last minute mercy. He clearly and pointedly presents "How we live today and everyday matters,.....because our life choices tell our true story.

This narrative separates beliefs from being and living.

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What we affirm / agree with... What we Believe is not the end all.  
Maybe, belief is just "a helpful" beginning????

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For some religious people, it is all about believing--believing a certain doctrine and dogma.  
Religious symbols are often used to identify those set beliefs held by their group / their religion.

For example, demanding that schools post the Ten Commandments or say the Lord's Prayer are efforts to get their stamp on the institution.

Those symbols mark ownership, much as a dog marks a tree.

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People can separate and judge based on what they claim to be their rules / their doctrine.  
We form tribes, religions and denominations because of our devotion to our codes and theological declarations.

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Consider the reason why creeds are recited, including the Nicene Creed. [???

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I suppose it is okay to self identify and to align with likeminded; however, our being / OUR behaviour is much more telling and revealing.

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The behaviour I am referring to is NOT obeying and acting out legalistic expectations.  
It is not simply modelling dictated piety or social courtesy.

In this Matthew story, Jesus is exposing behaviour as a revelation of being.  
Behaving as a revelation of being is more akin to doing justice, loving kindness and living humbly with God.

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Striving to live this way / Christ's way removes walls and barriers, and condemnation. It is inclusive!  
In contrast, projecting and defending "Beliefs" separates people.

Symbols, images and symbolic acts are used to reinforce one's unity to a group .... and separation from others.

The fish symbol on car or place of business projects that message.

Emphasizing / focusing on a certain set of beliefs and symbols is a primary reason so many could ignore Donald Trump's pathetic behaviour. His personal behaviour did not matter as much as his devotion to their group.

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This past June, Donald had a corridor **violently** cleared so that he could pander to his tribe of followers with symbolism.

There he stood, in front of a church building, holding up a Bible.  
Nothing was said, but the message was clear.

It was a display of allegiance and solidarity to his "Religious Group" of supporters.

I found it abusive and appalling.

I expected him to explode into flames.... leaving only a smoldering pile of sulfur. They Loved it!

Alas, it did not happen.

God works in mysterious ways.

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Yet, painfully for me, was my revulsion demonstrated that I placed too much value on those religious symbols, too.

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Oh, so very soon, that man will cease to enter any of my sermons.

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Even so, one last reference: Trump's prolonged self torture of denying defeat.....is Very Telling.

He and his camp are separating more ...and isolating themselves.

They have formed a tempest of torment..... Their own hell.

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Today's story mentions goats and sheep being separated.

I think the separation is obvious and is self inflicted.

We choose our path.

We choose our destiny.

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The embedded illustrations in the text reveal this to be the case.

These examples about interacting with *the least* presents God's passion for the least. The examples show the future by viewing the past.

The intent / the message is Not to be a final statement or judgment.

Not at all, the purpose is an invitation for us to reflect on who we are?

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This passage is not a weapon, But it is meant to startle us / to sharply confront us.

We are compelled to consider our past / our choices.

We are invited to examine who we are.

And, .... we do this in the context that it is Not too late to change.

The story is a petition / a seed for change.

When we look at ourselves what do we see?

Do we see devotion to doctrines and expectations?

Or, Do we see loving compassion?

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There was a small city, much like any aspiring small city, except that this city named all its streets after names and places from the Bible.

In a fine, perfectly painted Victorian house, on the corner of Matthew Street and Leviticus Avenue, live Hazel.

Hazel lived alone. She was a widow.

Hazel kept her place in pristine condition. She had a beautiful , well manicured yard, and there was not a weed to be found in her lawn. She spent many hours maintaining her place. To be sure nothing was bothered, she had a “keep off the grass” sign in the front yard.

A few houses down from her place, on Matthew Street, lived Edna.  
Edna was also a widow.

Edna’s old house desperately needed to be painted; it was a shade off of faded white. Her yard appeared unkempt. There was not much grass to be seen, and most of the front yard was a big crater, as if a large tree had been dug out. No one remembered how the hole got there.

The neighbourhood kids loved it because they thought it was a giant sand box, and that’s probably why she did not have much of a lawn. The grass didn’t have a chance with all the children trampling it down.

Even though Edna’s place did not look very nice, she did have a couple of apple trees in her yard, and strawberry plants lined the foundation of her house.

Every little stomach knew where to get a free snack of fruit, and frequently cookies came with it.

Edna sometimes attended the same church where Hazel was a member.

Hazel was active and well respected in her church. She rarely put money in the offering basket, but she did contribute significantly to special causes, especially the popular ones. There is even a brass plaque on the organ with her name on it..... because she was the one who bought it for the church.

Edna always put a little something in the offering basket, and she helped out some in the church too, but folks didn’t know what to think of her. She seemed a bit eccentric, and it was obvious that she did not manage her money well.

And, there were rumblings that she had be seen, occasionally going into the local pub.

She was even spotted driving a man home, ...with **his own car**.

It doesn’t matter if he was too drunk to drive. A respectable woman should not do such a thing, at such a time in the night.

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To be sure, the gossip was muffled with the notation that it was a shame that she was not coping very well with her losses.

Her husband and three children died in a car accident, years ago.

People would say that she changed after that tragedy, that she lost control of her life, and that she should be more careful with what she does with what little money she has.

Frequently, she would give money to those who would likely just squander it away.

The mutter was heard, "Those people do not have real jobs, and for a reason"....., and everyone understood what that meant.

“Poor old Edna,” was the mantra, “She’s lost control.”

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In contrast, Hazel was in control, and managed her world quite well. Except for the neighbourhood children.

Hazel's house was on the corner, children could not resist taking a short cut through her yard, in spite of the big “Keep off the grass sign.”

They were in hurry to see if the strawberries were ripe at Edna’s place, and a sign is fun to jump over, anyways.

Hazel would hear them out front, and stomp out her front door and stand on her porch, with folded arms. She just stood there like a statue. [ ]

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Hazel had good reason to be defensive / to protect herself. She was alone, and she knew it. She felt she had to take care of herself and her property—what was hers.

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One day, a stranger knocked on her door. He looked a bit tattered and out of place.

In a gentle voice, he asked Hazel, “Do you know where the Paradise Pub is? I am suppose to meet a friend there.”

He added, "The pub is not listed on Google maps."

Hazel knew where it was, but was not about to tell him.

*Proper people do not go there.*

Moreover, a strange man on her doorstep made her nervous.

Hazel dismissed him with, "I do not know where it is."

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The stranger thanked her and left. He walked down Matthew Street, and could not help but notice the children digging in the front yard of Edna’s home.

Edna had just come out with a plate of fresh cookies.

She saw the man standing on the sidewalk in front of her house.

She noticed that he looked perplexed, and a bit forlorn.

She called to him, “I have an extra cookie for you. Do you want one?”

A smiling nod and a chocolate chip cookie later, Edna asked the stranger, “How can I help you?”

The stranger replied, “I’m looking for Paradise....., and before he could finish,..... Edna interrupted, “Paradise, I’m heading there, too. Let’s go there together.”

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We are all broken. We are all wounded and hurt.

We are all searching.  
The least are members of God's family, no matter what you believe.  
The least people.... and the least of all creation.

Paradise is being in God's family.  
God loves Love.