



Matthew 25:31-46

Bishop Tim Smith, North Carolina Synod  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

### EXEGETICAL NOTES

#### Telling the Story

Of the four gospels, Matthew's has the most judgment. Many a passage in the lectionary from Matthew ends with "weeping and gnashing of teeth." There's not a lot of obvious grace and forgiveness in this particular passage which implies that God will treat us exactly as we have treated Jesus. God will know how we've treated Jesus by observing how we've treated the "least of these among us." Sobering words, reminiscent of The Lord's Prayer in which we pray that Jesus would forgive our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

The text is clearly eschatological, a glimpse of the fullness of the reign of God. In fact, it's the text assigned in year A of the lectionary to "Reign of God" or "Christ the King" Sunday. In that liturgical context, it transitions us to thoughts of the end-times, the coming judgment as Christ returns, as our creeds profess, "to judge the living and the dead." In Matthew, instead of gathering all together, Christ is depicted as separating out the sheep (good) from the goats (bad). No matter how you slice it, this text emphasizes the profound consequences of our actions and of the lack thereof.

This text is also, in a classical sense, sacramental. Where do we meet Jesus? Sure, in the water, the bread and wine, the Word, but we also are promised here in Matthew 25 that we meet Jesus in the least of these, our brothers and sisters. Wherever we find the poor,



the neglected, the refugee, the broken, the lost, the forgotten, the disenfranchised, the prisoner, hungry, naked, or thirsty, there we find Jesus. We are commanded to love God and our neighbor as our self. Our love for our neighbor is a measure of our love for God. Since God is revealed in Christ who will come as judge at the end of all things, the church, also established in Matthew's Gospel, seeks to find and serve Jesus in service to the poor.

It is interesting to note that not only the righteous but the unrighteous as well do not realize that it was Jesus whom they encountered with opportunity to feed, clothe, visit, etc. Since for Matthew's Jesus (Sermon on the Mount) all of the law is summed up in the Levitical commandment to love God and love neighbor, the law of love is paramount whether we are dealing with God in Christ or dealing with our fellow human beings. Love is always the command and expectation.

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Note also that the “goats” or the unrighteous didn’t do anything wrong, per se; they failed to do some right things. Their sins were of omission rather than commission. Their (our) failure is in neglecting the multitude of human pain in the world around them. God in Christ, just as the God of Leviticus, expects us to extend hospitality and help to our neighbors in need. To reject doing so is to reject Jesus himself.

### APPLICATIONS FOR TODAY

There is no doubt that we find Jesus in the refugee who is often hungry, thirsty, sick, and even imprisoned. So much political rhetoric swirls around us these days about “America” that we forget we live in a global community and that very few places have the privileges and resources that this country affords us.

As we watch on television the plight of those in Syria, Central and South America, Africa, and other places who are displaced from their homes by war, persecution, and natural disaster, how easy it is for us to discern that this is not our problem except to make sure that they don’t become a burden on Europe’s or our social, economic, and health care systems. How do you think Jesus would assess that approach to today’s refugee crises? Who are the sheep? Who are the goats? Who are the least of these?

Several months ago the Ku Klux Klan led a protest against refugee resettlement being coordinated through Lutheran Services Carolinas (LSC) at its Columbia, SC

office. Tracts were passed out by the Klan with extremely derogatory remarks and labels for both refugees and those who resettle them—especially Syrian refugees. Both North Carolina’s and South Carolina’s governors asked for legislation requesting that no Syrian refugees be resettled in the Carolinas, but LSC continues quietly to be about the work of resettling those who have been forced from their homes by circumstances beyond their control.

### SERMON OUTLINE

The preacher needs to take great care with this passage not to jump to conclusions about who the sheep are and who the goats are. Perhaps it’s just as likely that we are the ones in need. The Gospel in this heavily Law passage is that Jesus continues to come to us in the form of the needy, the refugee, the prisoner, the sick, the hungry.

Lest we proclaim a totally works-righteous message, we would do well to remember what Garrison Keillor says: “You can only do so much. But you have to do that much.” Or what Bonhoeffer warns about cheap grace. There are always consequences of our actions and of our failure to act. Still, remember the larger context of Matthew’s Gospel, including the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus teaches that God does not want us to return “an eye for an eye” but to act with grace and mercy as God does. Perhaps that’s why we emphasize both Law AND Gospel. It’s a both/and rather than an either or.

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The late Archbishop of Atlanta, John Donahue, whom I knew when he was Bishop of the Diocese of Charlotte, recounts a visit to Calcutta: Several bishops were gathered together in the chapel for evening worship when Mother Teresa came hurrying down the aisle and motioned for the bishops to follow her, "Come quickly," she urged them. "The Lord has returned!" This clearly got the bishops' attention, and they left worship and followed her out of the chapel, down a long hallway, through the kitchen, and out the door to a small porch.

There lay a leper who had lost his arms and legs and was clearly in his last hours on this earth. His body was covered with sores. Mother Teresa, says Donahue, slid down beside the man and cradled his torso and held the man gently. With tears in her eyes, she said to the bishops, "How blessed we are that our Lord has returned during your visit."

Jesus is present with us in the Word, in the bread and wine, and in the least of these, our brothers and sisters.