

Matthew 25: 31-46  
Creekside COB  
November 16, 2008

### **“Do We See Thee?”**

The doorbell rings, and a woman cleaning her floors answers. She opens the door and finds a young man holding a bouquet of flowers and a note. *“These are from a Mr. Mop.”* The soundtrack of, *“Baby Come Back,”* (you can blame it all on me.), starts to play, and a worn, sponge-head mop peers longingly at her from the bushes. She slams the door shut and returns to cleaning with the new “love of her life,” a mop called the “Swiffer.” The doorbell rings again. She opens it and sees a delivery boy holding a heart-shaped box of chocolates. *“Candy-gram!”* he says. Mr. Mop peeks from behind a tree, and the door slams shut again.

There is a knock at *your* door. Opening it, you see a pleasant looking man. *“Can I help you?”* you ask. He replies, *“Behold I stand at your door and knock.”* “I know-- that’s why I answered.” “May I come in?” He seems trustworthy, so you let the stranger in. Then he says, *“I’m here to eat with you.”* “Wait a second. You didn’t mention a meal!” “You invited me in, didn’t you?” Yes, but...”

**KNOCK! KNOCK!** Someone else is at the door. Your guest says, “I’ve brought some folks along. Hope you don’t mind,” he says. You open the door, and there is a line of people extending from your porch to the sidewalk, and stretching as far as you can see. You can tell that they have been through tough times. They are disheveled and distressed, and the guest tells you they are his friends.

Our disposable society makes mountains out of landfills. Our lifestyle is shaped by the *“use it, discard it, get another one”* philosophy. Our values are distorted, which is why we *love things and use people* rather than *use things and love people*.

I recall visiting a very bitter woman. She was in her seventies and seldom left the house because of her disabled husband. In his presence she complained, "He can't do anything helpful." I asked if there might be some way that volunteers from the church could lend a hand. In a dismissive tone she said, "I doubt they would be of any use to me."

Our disposable, dismissive society judges people by their usefulness. If they can't help themselves, and can't be productive, they're discarded like used mops, and the door is slammed in their faces.

What makes the Bible so unsettling is that the marginal people we have put *out of sight and out of mind* are the people whose company Jesus prefers. Even more unsettling is the fact that Jesus is SO CLOSE to them that he is one of them.

The final judgment described in Matthew 25 is familiar to the Brethren. It underscores our conviction that discipleship must be "lived out" in concrete acts of caring and compassion to "*the least of these.*" This is the gospel text for Christ the King Sunday. *When the Son of man comes in his glory, he will sit on his glorious throne ...*" (Matt. 25:31).

Most of us picture the final judgment in individualistic terms. One day we will stand in a single-file line leading to Christ's throne. But this isn't how Matthew describes it. The judgment is corporate. ALL NATIONS from the least to the greatest will assemble before Him. The One on the throne isn't King Tut, King George, or King Fish. His kingship isn't *constitutional* like the King of England. He's not a "*figure-head*" like the King of Norway. The *King of Kings* who is *Lord of Lords* will preside over the world court.

They will not be judged by the power of their armies, the achievements of their intelligencia, nor those crowned, "*Cream of the Crop.*" The nations will be judged by how they treat the people at the bottom of the heap.

King Jesus will divide the nations into two camps. Their destiny *and ours* comes down to two sayings: “*I was a stranger and you welcomed me,*” (Matt. 25:35), and, “*I was a stranger and you did not welcome me,*” (Matt. 25:43). The King will say, “All right now, listen up. All the sheep gather over here to my right. Goats, you’re over here to my left, *your right*”. The sorting process won’t take long. It will come down to what we did or didn’t do.

Ask John or Mary Doe Christian, “What must you do to be saved?” One answer might be, “Nothing. You don’t have to DO anything. Your salvation has been won. All that’s left to do is *accept it.*” Another might be, “You must believe the Lord Jesus is the way, truth, and life. *Salvation is through him and him alone.* Another might be, “You are justified by grace *through FAITH.* Neither works nor deeds, no matter how noble, can make you right with God.” Another might be, “Salvation must have tangible evidence. Faith without works is d-e-a-d, DEAD,” as it says in James.

According to Matthew, our destiny is tied to people we did or did not take in. Being “for God” will be demonstrated by our treatment of the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the prisoner.

This has tremendous implications. There is no belief that trumps feeding a hungry person. There is no doctrine that is more important than giving a cup of water to a person dying of thirst. There is no particular interpretation of Scripture that is greater than clothing the naked and showing compassion to the sick and imprisoned.

Christianity puts enormous emphasis on the incarnation. We believe that the *Joy of heaven to earth came down.* God became flesh and lived among us. The High King of heaven *traded his throne for a stable and a cross.* The Savior became a servant. The King came in a disguise we didn’t expect – a disguise from which we can turn and look the other way.

In 1895 the Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy wrote a story that mirrored his discovery of the incognito Christ. In a certain town

there lived a cobbler named Martin Avdeitch. He had a tiny room in a basement with a window that looked out on the street. He could only see the feet of people who passed by. He lived there long enough to know people by their boots. There was hardly a pair that hadn't been through his hands to stitch, patch, and re-sole. He charged little, did fine work, and was always reliable.

Martin was a good man. In his old age he thought more about his soul and drawing nearer to God. Years ago his wife died, leaving him with a three-year-old son. He had other children, but all had died in infancy. No sooner had Kapiton reached an age when he could help his father and be a joy to him, than he got sick and died. He buried his son and was overcome by despair. He was angry with God for and prayed to die. Martin soon stopped going to church. Then one day an old man Martin knew came to visit. He had been on an eight-year religious pilgrimage, and Martin poured out his heart to him. "I don't wish to live. All I ask of God is that I die, for I've lost hope." The old man said, "We cannot judge God's ways. If your son should die and you should live, there is a reason. You despair because you want to live for your own happiness." *"Why else should I live?"* Martin asked. *"Live for God,"* the old man said. *"When you've learnt to live for him, all will be well to you."*

Martin pondered his words and bought a Bible. He got so absorbed in it that the lamp often burnt out before he was finished. He read every night. The more he read the more he understood what God required and what Martin could do to live for him. The more he read, the clearer and happier he felt in his mind. He loved the Sermon on the Mount. He was taken with the verse, *"Why do you call me Lord and not do the things I say?"* He realized he was too concerned about himself—how to get a cup of tea, keep warm and comfortable, and not think of others.

That night as he slept, someone called his name. "Who's there?" He called again, and a voice replied, "Martin, look out into the street tomorrow, for I shall come." The next morning he lit a fire to cook cabbage soup and porridge. He lit a lamp and sat at his workbench, wondering if the voice was real or just a dream. He looked out the window more than he worked. When he saw

unfamiliar boots, he stooped to look at faces. An old soldier carrying a spade stopped at the window. His boots were made of old, shabby felt. His name was Stepanitch. He cleared a little snow from the window, but stopped. He was worn out and cold. On an impulse, Martin stuck his awl in a boot, made some tea and invited the old man in. *“God bless you,”* Stepanitch said as he drank tea to warm himself. *“Are you expecting someone?”* he asked. *“Not exactly, but last night I heard something I can’t get out of my mind,”* Martin said. He told the old man about reading the Gospels. *“Have you heard of it?”* *“I have, but I can’t read,”* the old man said. Martin spoke Jesus’ words from his heart. *“He who humbles himself shall be raised... He who would be first must be a servant... Blessed are the poor, the humble, and the meek.”* Tears came to Stepanitch’s eyes. *“Thank you Martin Avdeitch. You have given comfort for my soul and body.”*

Martin returned to work. Later, he saw a poorly dressed stranger at the window holding a crying baby. He opened the door and cried, *“My dear. Come in. You can wrap your baby better in a warm place.”* She sat by the stove and said she had no milk for her baby because she had nothing to eat herself. Martin gave her soup and porridge. He then brought her an old cloak he had hanging on the wall. *“It’s a worn-out old thing, but it will do good to wrap you and your baby in.”* He offered her money... *“Take this for Christ’s sake.”* *“The Lord bless you,”* she said. *“All things are possible. Even your dream.”*

That afternoon he saw an old woman stop at his window. She carried a bag of woodchips on her shoulder. She also carried a box of apples to sell. As she dropped the sack, a boy in tattered clothes ran up and took an apple. She caught his coat sleeve and grabbed a handful of his hair. Martin stumbled up the steps, dropping his glasses. She cried, *“I’m taking you to the police!”* Martin said, *“Please let him go. Forgive him for Christ’s sake.”* The boy tried to run away, but Martin held him. *“I saw you take the apple. Ask Granny’s forgiveness. He began to cry and beg pardon. Martin took an apple from the box, paid the woman and gave it to him.”*

He should be whipped so that he should remember,” she said. But Martin replied, “That’s our way, not God’s way. If he should be whipped for an apple, what should be done to us? God bids us to forgive—everyone. The old woman sighed and said, “True enough. The old ones should show them a better way. God help the boy.” The boy said, “Let me carry the chips for you. I’m going your way.”

That night, Martin took the Gospels from the shelf. As he opened it he recalled the dream and then had a feeling someone was behind him. He turned and there seemed to be people in a dark corner. A voice whispered, “Martin, don’t you know me?” “Who is it?” The voice said, “It is I,” and out of the corner stepped Stepanitch who smiled and disappeared like a cloud. “It is I,” said the voice again. The mother appeared and she smiled and her baby laughed as they vanished. “It is I,” said the voice once more as the old woman and the boy with the apple stepped out, smiled, and disappeared. Martin’s soul grew glad. He crossed himself and read from the page he had opened—“I was hungry and you fed me. I was thirsty and you gave me a drink.” And at the bottom of the page he read, “As you did it to the least of these, you did it to me.” Martin’s dream had come true. (Leo Tolstoy, *Where Love Is, God Is*)

On the screen is a painting by my favorite wildlife artist, Robert Bateman. Its just grass, but you wouldn’t want to be in this scene. A lion is inside peering at you, camouflaged so perfectly you can’t tell he’s there. He has a name. In the Chronicles of Narnia, he is called, Aslan.

Daily we encounter Christ the King in camouflage. His disguises are endless, and one day he will either point us toward the sheep or the goats. You don’t need to persecute the downtrodden to be a goat. All you have to do is nothing. Just look away. Shut the door. Keep to your own kind. Stay warm and comfortable.

Vince Turner was right. *We are* the best-kept secret in Elkhart County. No one knows we’re here. I have a suspicion that is the way we want it.