

“Reigning Passions”

Matthew 25:31–46
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Christ the King Sunday

This past Monday morning, one of the centering prayer participants asked if she could share something that happened to her on her way to the church. She saw a falcon/hawk fly down and land on a smaller bird in the grass in front of her; the bigger bird attacked the smaller. She said, “I was mesmerized and I was horrified.” She was so mesmerized that she was standing in the middle of the street and moved to the sidewalk. She said she kept trying to remind herself that this is the natural order of things; there is no animosity in this, it is not anger or vengeance, but simple instinct for creatures in the food chain. After our prayer time, I asked if I could share this story and in agreeing, she talked it through again. The moment will lose its immediacy and therefore some of its power, but I suspect, will probably never be forgotten.

So consider that one small event, something ordinary to nature, one person’s need to process it and share the story at least twice in the first hour. And then take yesterday and multiply it by the feelings in one day’s news cycle.

After teaching with parables that use a few bridesmaids demonstrating readiness to answer God’s call and a leper who gratefully received God’s healing, chapter twenty-five comes to a close with a promised arbitration between the commendable and lamentable among us.

And all the same problems still exist. According to the UNICEF website,

Famine and lack of a reliable food supply are threatening the lives of approximately 80 million people — more than half of them children — in South Sudan, Somalia, Nigeria and Yemen, and in nine additional countries across Africa and the Middle East. More than 2.5 million face imminent risk of death from severe acute malnutrition. Almost 17 million people — including many children — will need lifesaving vaccines, medicine and healthcare.

In the United States, 41 million people, including 13 million children, do not have enough to eat; the same site reports, 1 in 10 adults, and 1 in 7 children in Minnesota are struggling with hunger (Feeding America website).

I find this overwhelming. For many years, I distanced myself from this scripture for this reason. Rather than prompt action, the statistics make me feel powerless, horrified but not mesmerized. I say a prayer of thanks for our community gardeners, and Halley Q. Brown, and Neighborhood House food shelves, while hoping for the best outcome I can expect when inevitably judged a goat.

The same thing happens when I think of those in need of clean drinking water in Africa, in Flint, Michigan or San Juan.

But Jesus is about inviting choice, not shame, so there's more going on here. I don't know what your life experience has been, I've never seen people wandering about naked on the street – there was the time when, as the resident assistant for student housing, a DMIN student locked himself out of his guest room on the way to the shower and had to come to me, the keeper of the keys, to gain re-admittance but he had a t-shirt and a towel and a suitcase full of clothes on the other side of the door.

If nakedness really comes to pass, I would be more concerned about mental illness, dementia, or substance abuse than wardrobe. Which prompts an opening to begin to think of this vast mission in a different way; we have the opportunity to stretch out our thinking from numbers and statistics to consider what it feels like to lose everything– maybe in a house fire like those that ate up so much of Idaho, Utah, Oregon, California, and other states this past fall. This scripture has been quoted a great deal in public letters from the PCUSA to the State Department in defense of increasing, not decreasing or banning refugee settlement in the US. It asks us to consider what it feels like to go from abundance or enough to complete and total need. And I think what Jesus wants us to do while looking at the big picture here in the big picture is to feel empathy. He needs our compassion.

Because we feel naked when our feelings of hurt and loss are exposed; times when grief is so raw that tears suddenly flow in line at the grocery store. The culture in which we live is largely disapproving of strong feelings and tears that because most people apologize for both.

What about women who have been imprisoned by sexual harassment or assault and not found a safe place to talk about it, lost their jobs, or have not been believed? What about gay, lesbian, or transgender individuals who have no safe place to come out? There are a good many people who are confined by poverty and held captive by racism, prejudice and fear.

What we are talking about here and what Jesus was pointing toward are crises, systemic evil, and trauma, all human 'norms' contrary to the Kingdom of God. The word 'trauma' comes from the Greek and means 'a wound' or 'an injury inflicted upon the body by an act of violence.' Theologian Serene Jones adds, "Contemporary trauma studies have extended its application to the mind and the emotions, focusing on the effects of violence on our vast interior worlds, or to use another ancient term, our *psyches*" (Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, p. 12).

She continues, " ...violence can leave you with a wounded soul - a life marked by obsessive thoughts, acute anxiety, depression, dissociative states ... and low-grade forms of misery lingering so long that they become normalized and cease to appear wound-like at all" (Jones, p. 13). This reading from Matthew 25 is overwhelming in its scope but absolutely clear in its demands. We are not the saviors of the world, however as servants of the Savior of the world however, a broken and contrite heart is absolutely necessary. In the image of a final sorting of sheep and goats according to lifestyle, we see how much Jesus values an empathic response to our neighbor's and even our enemy's wounds and crises because that is what saves the world.

Like the woman who saw the falcon attack the bird, we might be horrified or mesmerized. And we do, thank heavens have the ability to make donations to agencies who are on the ground in troubled areas to help. But we have to fight against our own desire to hold back or withdraw – what Jesus is asking for today is a living, moving, and breathing solidarity with the world's wounded souls, not

just for those whom we choose as worthy but a mindset of compassion for the aching masses within the human and earthly family.

In its earliest Latin iteration, '*passio*' meant suffering and endurance; compassion then meant 'to be with suffering.' In the Middle Ages and through the time of the troubadours, '*passio*' came to mean general 'strong emotions and desires'; the Greek entered in as '*pathos*' or 'emotion' and scholarship reveals how *passio* and *com-passio* – to be with suffering – became more about following one's own private '*pathos*' or emotions and desires. Compassion returns us to the communal.

Compassion does not eliminate the need to take responsibility for one's actions, to show compassion does not condone behaviors or circumstances but it recognizes humanity which will, like a human form of grace, eventually invite repentance and reconciliation. Compassion is our own (inner) suffering waking up and seeing the pain of others as though in a mirror. When we show compassion to others we remember our own vulnerability; our own unassuaged hungers and longings in life, our thirst for right relationship, the nakedness and shame of some of our past actions, and time lost in the prisons of resentment, hurt, and loss come to mind and find healing when offering compassion to another. Compassion is a communal balm. The alternative is to continue on in our fast-moving, individualized culture, where we have gone from one unhealed trauma to the next for the decades of our lives to centuries of human life.

Again from Serene Jones, "Understanding the effects of violence upon the workings of our imagination – and upon the bodies and souls of persons who have been traumatized – is the central task Too often we believe that when physical healing occurs, mental healing naturally follows, and that with time, all wounds heal. Such is not always the case, however. Violence often cuts so deeply into our minds that surface healings cover it over and, hidden away, allow it to expand. The balm-like work of theology and of religion is to uncover and mend such wounds. And what medicine does this? Healing lies as much if not more, in the stories we tell and the gestures we offer as in the doctrines we preach" (Jones, Introduction).

Jesus said, "... just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Matt 25:3c); we get to the twenty-fifth chapter in Matthew's gospel and Jesus hope for us is not our being able to quote Matthew chapter and verse as much as his hope for our ability to do the caring each and every day because that is critical to the visibility of the kingdom of God and the salvation of the world.

Our awareness of 80 million hungry people in Africa and the Middle East is unique to our time; it's overwhelming and horrifying. We each have to find the scope in which we can minister to the world and this will always be determined by who we are in Christ and our commitment to the reign of Christ, who said, among other things. "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me," (Matt 11:29), so we are never alone in this task.

And even more so, when we join our passion, knowing that includes our shame and vulnerabilities, as well as our strengths, together within the Body of Christ – and this is key: we are as much in need of the healing love of Christ as any and if we really know that, we cannot help but share it. This love has been given to us, as Christ our king said, "Go and be well." He said, "My peace I give to you."

He taught us all we need to know to be a healing balm for the howling ache at the center of the world:

Jesus said, "I call you my friend."

Jesus said, "Abide in me and I in you." He said, "I will give you rest."

Jesus said, "You are the light of the world." And, "You will shine like the sun."

Jesus said, "You are my sister. You are my brother." He said, "Watch and pray."

And Jesus said, "I am with you always." Yes and amen!