

“The End”
Matthew 25:31-46
November 26, 2017 Christ the King
The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings

The Great Throne Judgement it is sometimes called. It sounds like another book in the Narnia series or a lost sequel to a JR Tolkien epic, the kind of movies we watched with the kids around the holidays. And this got me thinking some about movies. So... let's start an argument. What's the best movie of all time? Or, more specifically, for the purposes of the sermon, what is the funniest movie of all time? Lately if you see a poll on Netflix or in Rolling Stone, the movies that seem to make it to the top of the list are ones like “Young Frankenstein” and “Dr. Strangelove” and “Blazing Saddles.” But I'd like to argue for a movie called “The End” with Burt Reynolds and Dom Deluise. Have you seen it? You have to have sort of a dark sense of humor to appreciate it, because it's about death and suicide and mental illness, all very serious subjects. But we, as humans, can sometimes find humor in the most unexpected moments and being able to laugh at ourselves in these otherwise tender moments is what makes us uniquely human.

Case in point: Burt plays a guy named Sonny who is a divorced father of a 12 year old daughter. Sonny is told by his doctor that he only has a year to live. He doesn't want to get sicker and sicker and so he just decides to end it all. But he's not quite brave enough to do it, so the movie is about his comic failures to carry it out, all-the-while assisted by his insane asylum sidekick, Dom Deluise, who in many ways really makes the movie. But what I want to get to is the final scene of the movie, when Sonny in a final attempt, starts to swim out into the ocean, far enough that he will be too exhausted and won't have the strength to swim back. But as he begins to sink below the waves, he thinks of his daughter and realizes that whatever quality of life he has, he wants to spend more time with her. He discovers that he really wants to live even if it is only for a year. So he prays to God for strength to swim back to shore.

Actually he begins to yell and to bargain with God about all the things he will do for God if he will only make him a better swimmer, like donating half of his money to charity, obeying the commandments. And God hears him! Suddenly Sonny finds the strength to start swimming again. But by the time he realizes that he is going to make it to shore, the fifty percent of his income that he was going to donate to God has now become ten percent and though he still agrees to obey the commandments, he qualifies that he'll obey the ones he can remember. But the important thing is, the point of the ending is that he wants to live. In the end—the humorous way we bargain with God aside—Sonny realizes that our lives are not about our deaths, but how we live our lives.

And that's what this parable is about too. Too often it is seen as a parable of the Last Judgement—after we lived our lives. But I wonder if it is a parable about how we live our lives in the present. The scene is one in which the Son of Man—Jesus—comes in his glory and divides all the nations of the earth, all the people, some on his right hand and some on his left. He then invites some into eternal life and sends the others out into eternal punishment. Is this a parable of the end? Is it a parable about what it will be like when we die? Is this a vision of what heaven will be like? That we will stand before a great throne and be judged? Is it a story about the end of life, the end of history? Well, yes, in a way it is all those things, but maybe not in the way we usually think of it. It is a story about the end, but in another sense of the word “end.” Maybe the word end here refers to purpose rather than the final chapter. Maybe even in the movie “The End,” was not about ending his life, but about the purpose of life.

Do you remember the first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism? Some of you who have been steeped in Presbyterianism longer than me will remember having to memorize the questions and answers about the basics of the Presbyterian faith reflected in the Catechism. The very first question is “What is the chief end of man?” That does not mean, what happens when we die, what will it be like? It uses the word “end” in terms of purpose, not finale, not conclusion.

What is the primary purpose of human beings?

Anyone know?

To glorify God and enjoy him forever, is the answer.

So, I guess the question then is: when does forever start? When does eternal life begin? When we die? What makes us think that? Is this passage about believing in God so you go to Heaven when you die? Is it about what you need to do so you can get into heaven? Is it about what heaven is going to be like? Don't you wonder about that? Occasionally as a pastor, I get asked that question, and you know what I answer? I have no idea. The Bible doesn't tell us. The Bible in general (and Matthew in particular) doesn't seem to be that interested in Heaven and Hell. Nor are many of the great biblical scholars. In the 1500 pages of the *Institutes of Christian Religion*, John Calvin devotes only a couple of passages to Heaven, and one paragraph to Hell. More recently the biblical scholar N.T. Wright notes that there is almost no talk in the Bible about going to live in Heaven when you die, and less still about Hell. He also reminds us that the continuous talk about the Kingdom of Heaven in Matthew's gospel is not about a place—Heaven—but about something else entirely. It's about God's sovereign rule breaking through into the earthly realm.¹

Have you ever looked through our hymnal? How many hymns in there are about heaven? Not many. They are about living the Christian life here and now. There are plenty of hymns of praise to God, lots of psalms, songs like today's praising Jesus as king, but there are almost none about “in the sweet by and by.” If you think the question is: Am I going to Heaven? Will I be saved? Am I a sheep or a goat? Matthew suggests that you have missed the point. And anyway, like most church members and most people in general, chances are that you are less concerned about the End of the World than you are about the End of the Month. What you're seeking is probably not pie in the sky, but, as Archbishop

¹ Wright, N.T., *Surprised by Hope*. P. 18.

Desmond Tutu says, pie in the here and now.² Strength for the journey, not what is at the journey's end.

When Matthew speaks about the Kingdom of Heaven, he does not mean what condition we will be in when our lives are over. He means the rule of Christ in the world right now. He means the breaking in of Heaven into our world. He means “thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth . . .” When the Bible speaks of eternal life, when does that start? At the moment we die? When the Bible speaks of eternal life, or eternal punishment for that matter, it is the condition of living with God or living without God, and whatever side of the grave that happens to be on is irrelevant.

It's now.

C.S. Lewis contemplates this in his book about heaven and hell, *The Great Divorce*. When Lewis visits the outskirts of heaven, his guide tells him that “in the end, earth will not be a very distinct place. In the end, the blessed will say, “I have always been in heaven,” and the damned will say, “I have always been in hell,” and both will speak truly.”³

That's what this parable is about: not what heaven will be like; not what it will be like at the end of things: but what am I supposed to be doing right now? It's not about what it will be like when we see Jesus on the great throne in the next life, but what does it mean to have him on the throne of our hearts in this life?

That's the question and the parable answers it. What is life like? Here and now, not in the sweet by and by. Not how do I get to heaven, but how do I act today? What does God want from us. It's this simple.

It reminds me of the saying by Henry David Thoreau, “Don't be too moral. You may cheat yourself out

² Tutu, Desmond. *Rainbow People of God*. P. 29.

³ Lewis, C.S. *The Great Divorce*.

of too much life. Aim above morality. Be not simply good; be good for something.” In this parable God is telling us what he is calling us to do, our vocation.

But you may be saying, I’m not a pastor, I’m not a worker in a social service agency, I’m not a missionary. I can’t do those things. Should I give up what I do for a living, taking care of my family, should I give that up to go feed the poor? What if we all did that?

Some of us struggle our whole lives wondering what it is that God asks us to do, wondering what is required of us. In her book called “An Altar in the World” the Episcopal priest and author Barbara Brown Taylor talks about her time in seminary struggling with what God wanted her to do. It seemed that all her colleagues in seminary were sure what they were going to do when they graduated but she was just at loose ends. So she went away to a lonely place to pray. And she prayed, and she kept praying until she finally got an answer. She says, “then one night when my whole heart was open to hearing from God what I was supposed to do with my life, God said, “Anything that pleases you.” “What?” she said. “What kind of an answer is that?” “Do anything that pleases you,” the voice in her head said again, “and belong to me.”⁴

Do anything and belong to me.

You may have a job caring for children or caring for the aged, you may run a corporation or work in a factory, you may teach or study or practice law or medicine, or clean houses or chop wood. Whatever we do to make money and whatever we do to feed our soul, we are asked to be good for something, something other than ourselves because we don't belong to ourselves. As the psalm said in our call to worship, it is he that made us and we are his, we are his people and the sheep of his pasture.

⁴ Taylor, Barbara Brown. *An Altar in the World*, p. 110.

And this parable is a description of what life looks like in that pasture. The hungry are fed, the thirsty are given water, the sick are visited, the stranger is welcomed. If, as the church of Christ, we are not doing that here and now, then Christ is not king here. I hope and pray that Christ is king here in this place and in each of our hearts. The proof will be in that stranger who walks in or in the sick person who is cared for, or in the hungry person who receives food as if at a heavenly banquet. Sometimes when we do a benediction, we give the charge, "May you see the face of Christ in everyone you meet, and may everyone you meet see the face of Christ in you." That would be great and amazing and totally surprising. Because the people in the parable never saw the face of Christ in the hungry or the stranger or the sick. They were confused, "Lord, when did we see you that way?" They didn't recognize Christ. They didn't know that Jesus was in the poor or the sick or the stranger or the lonely. But they cared and they served. When we go out into the world, or even here amongst ourselves, will we see the face of Christ in those we encounter?

This parable doesn't teach us about the end of the world or the end of history. It teaches us about *our* end, our *purpose*. It teaches us what the kingdom of heaven looks like, when Christ is on the throne of our hearts. All are welcomed, all are cared for, all have a seat at the table.