

November 22, 2020

Jeff's Reflection on Matthew 25:31-46

Once upon a time there was a beautiful princess. One day she was walking by the stream in the castle courtyard, when a frog leapt out of the water, and began to speak! "I once was a prince, said the frog, but then a hex was put upon me and I was changed into a frog, and the only way I will ever know true love is to be kissed by a beautiful princess." The princess' heart went out to the princely frog, so she knelt down and kissed the frog and ... instantly...the princess was turned into a beautiful frog! And the prince and princess frogs lived happily ever after!

I think I first heard that story told on Sesame Street, more than a few decades ago!

It's a take on a familiar fable – of a frog turning into a handsome prince after being kissed by a beautiful princess!

I suspect that is how most of us expect this story to turn out – and then, surprise, the transformation is different than expected, and we end up with two lovely frogs rather than two regal people!

That's what happens in the story Jesus tells in today's scripture reading. It is a new version of an already familiar story – of people being divided into the deserving and the underserving; of the righteous sheep being promoted and the disappointing goats being demoted. The good religious people get praised by God, and those who can't recite enough passages of scripture get banished.

Except, not in Jesus' version of the story. In Jesus' version, those who think they are the righteous are the ones the king rejects.

In fact, the entire story, as Jesus tells it, is one big surprise.

Jesus begins the story by using one of his favourite references for himself – "the Son of Man". It is a reference from the book of the prophet Daniel. It seems to have been a rather poetic way of saying 'a human being' – not the son of the divine, but the son of a human. The prophets looked forward to a human king who would rule with compassion, wisdom and fairness.

So Jesus begins this story with the longed for idealized 'human' king who will establish God's new order, God's will on earth.

The king, as expected, does a sorting of the righteous and the unrighteous – of those who have pleased the king and those who have not. As per the standard of the day, the ones of preferred status go to the king's right hand side.

To those on the right hand, the king says that they are blessed – why – here comes the report card statements – they followed the rules, they came to worship regularly, they were the successful ones, the prominent ones, the best and the brightest.

NOT!!! - why are they blessed? Because when they saw the king hungry, they gave him food. When they saw that the king was thirsty, they gave him something to drink. When the king was a stranger, when they didn't know that he was THE KING, they welcomed him. When they saw the king naked, vulnerable, they gave him clothes to wear. When the king was sick, they tended to him. When the king was in prison, they did not abandon him, but they came to visit him, they befriended him.

Of course they did! Of course, anyone would. We're talking about the king! Anyone and everyone would do anything for the king.

Except, they didn't, they hadn't. They had not seen the king hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, in prison. They had just seen other people, ordinary people, people whom they may not even have known...and to those people they gave food, and drink, and clothes and concern and visits and welcome.

And the people on the king's left- hand...they are puzzled, because certainly if they had seen the king in any kind of need, if they could have done anything to help the KING, they would have done it...but they were quite certain they had never seen the KING hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, alone, in prison.

And they were correct...they hadn't seen the king in any of those situations, but they also had seen other people, ordinary people, people whom they may not even have known...and they had done nothing to help.

The king says, whenever you did it to one of these, whenever you gave food, drink, etc. to anyone in need, you were giving it to me.

It is the Jesus way of seeing people. If the first become last and the last become first, then first and last don't mean anything, there are no firsts and lasts, there are just all God's children.

If you treat everyone as if they are a king, or a queen, or a sports superstar, or a celebrity, then no one is special and everyone is special.

I experienced this at a meeting of the General Council of The United Church of Canada. There were about 400 commissioners gathered from across Canada as well as some ecumenical guests from throughout the world. We were meeting at a university. The building in which we were meeting was a large hall, and it had one of those large retractable doors as one entrance -like the Zamboni doors at a rink.

In the morning, everyone entered the hall through that large door. As per usual at these meetings, everyone wore a name tag.

One morning, a number of youth gathered at the large entrance door. As people arrived, the youth would read each person's name on their name tag, and then announce each person's arrival – like dignitaries being greeted with trumpets at a grand ball – the youth would shout, “Hey everyone, here's Martha. Bob has arrived. Jill is now entering the hall...”

Everyone had their own 'red carpet' moment. Everyone was announced as someone who was special, significant, welcomed.

Jesus says, 'see everyone as someone to be loved. See the Christ in everyone, See the life of God in everyone, see that everyone belongs to God's royal family, God's family of the ordinary.'

In this COVID time, whether you are living alone or sharing space with others, whether you have a place to call home or have no place to call home...you have a home in the heart of God, in the love of God. God calls each of us by name, welcomes each of us with shouts of joy.

The princess becomes a beautiful frog, everyone becomes a member of the royal family, and everyone embodies God by feeding those who hunger, giving drink to those who thirst, clothing those who are naked, caring for those who are sick, welcoming those who are strangers, and visiting those imprisoned. The Christ in us responds to the Christ in others.

This world is saturated with the sacred, creation is filled with God, and each of us is a child of the Creator and a unique expression of the divine.

Thanks be to God. AMEN