

## Matthew 25:31-46

'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?" Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'

### "Looking for Loopholes"

The brilliant comedian and movie actor W. C. Fields was known not only for his wit but also for love of alcohol and his distrust of religion. The alcohol took its toll, and fields died at the relatively young age of 66. Late in life, one of Fields' friends, a journalist named Gene Fowler, came to visit an ailing Fields and found him in his garden and, surprisingly, with his nose deep in the Bible. Fowler, who knew Fields was an atheist, looked puzzled, and Field's gazed at his friend and said, "I'm looking for loopholes."

People of every age have been looking for loopholes. People have often looked at Christian faith as a means to an end, and that end is eternal life, and the fact that there are so many churches preaching so many doctrines on SALVATION tells me that there is little agreement on what exactly guarantees us a life beyond death. It means there are a lot of people who

are looking for that loophole, that verse in scripture that will put our minds at rest and let us know that all is well with our soul, that our eternal destiny is secure in Jesus Christ.

But our search for that key to our future – eternity with God - forces us to look at the present and question the kind of life that we are living in the here and now. We may envy someone like W.C. Fields, someone who achieved both fame and fortune, but as we deduce from his search for loopholes later in life, that the success he enjoyed did not calm his restless soul. For all the good that he may have done in the realm of entertainment, he still questioned his own eternal destiny. I think many people are like W.C. Fields; they reach a point in life when they have to stop and look at the life they are living and ask if they have been living life as it ought to be lived. And with that realization that there may be something wrong with the way they have been living life up to that point, and they feel anxious about making the change necessary to get them on track. Perhaps there is no loophole. Perhaps the assurance of life eternal only comes when the life you currently live is a life committed to God.

Perhaps you're here today looking for a loophole, or you feel that affiliating yourself with the Christian faith is a loophole; if you believe that Jesus is the Son of God who died for your sins then you get a "pass" into heaven, and to believe otherwise is taking quite a risk. And there is a scripture verse that may give you some sense of comfort with regard to your eternal life; it's Romans 9:10:

"...If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

Simple, right? But satisfying? Do you feel like you can go home now with the confidence that you are "saved"? If you listened to today's scripture reading, the answer is probably "no." In the passage from Matthew's gospel that was read today Jesus describes the day of his return, when all the nations will be gathered before him, and he doesn't anyone about what they believe; he's interested in what they've done. Have you tended to the needs of others, of the least of these? That phrase right there has a haunting ring to it, because it implies that we may have a bad habit of judging others, of categorizing them as "greater" and "lesser." We have no problem singing Alleluia and worshipping the Jesus who comes in glory with an entourage of angels, but would we welcome the Jesus who is homeless, jobless, hungry and thirsty? Suddenly salvation is not as certain as you may have thought.

Jesus challenges his original audience. To the good Jews listening to Jesus' parable of the Second Coming Jesus' words are nothing short of shocking; it

was a common belief among Jews that they were God's chosen people, and that means chosen regardless. You were "saved" simply because you were Jewish – you could trace your ancestry back to Jacob and Isaac and Abraham. Everyone else was "lost." But here Jesus is saying that there is a different criteria for salvation, that the ones who treat others with compassion are the ones who enter that gate while those who are callous and careless are cast away. And modern Christians who feel that making some verbal confession about the identity of Jesus is the only criteria necessary to attain that eternal life should feel just as uncomfortable as the ancient Jew who believed that their lineage guaranteed them some pie in the sky. There is a toxic theology going around in places that give themselves the name "church" that salvation depends upon getting the right doctrine, the right theology, about being able to explain exactly who Jesus is and believing that theology in your heart. That's a loophole. And what is a loophole other than a way to get around something. Matthew 25 doesn't give us a loophole; it tells us that we need to treat others, ALL others, as beloved children of God, because if we don't we are admitting that we want nothing to do with God. And regardless of what anyone will tell you, your soul will not be at rest unless you buckle down and really strive to help other people, particularly those that you may consider the *least*.

Now let me offer you something that you may misunderstand as a loophole: I don't believe that God is going to subject you to eternal torment for your failure to tend to the needs of others. I believe that you can live a life of self-indulgence and greed and hate and lies, and God will still leave the door open for you; it will be your choice about whether to go through that door or not, and you may not be ready to enter that door, but God will never slam the door in your face. There. Does that make you feel better? God is so loving that he would never abandon anyone at any time. So you needn't worry about your chances for eternal happiness if you close your heart to the least of these, if you pick and choose who to care for and who to abandon, or if you live your life focused solely and satisfying your own needs.

But what about your present? What about life in the here and now? if you choose to ignore the cries of the needy, to selectively tend to the needs of those you deem worthy or those who may in some way be a benefit to you, if you live a life focused on self-gratification, I ask you, how is that going for you? How is it with your soul? – that was a question that John Wesley would ask the people who belonged to those Methodist societies that formed in the 1700s – "How is it with your soul?" You see, John Wesley lived in a time and place where religion was not a popular thing – much like our time and place. Wars had been fought – Christian against Christian – over points of doctrine. Thousands of people were killing and being killed *in the name of Jesus* and

very little attention was being given to the poor, the sick, the hungry, *the least of these*. Something was terribly wrong with the church, people needed to get back on track. How? By living a holy life, which meant not just going to church and studying scripture and not cheating on your tax return: it also meant tending to the needs of the most vulnerable – the poor, the sick, the criminal, the orphans and the widows. John Wesley wanted to see the Church get back on track.

And not for the sake of his own salvation – at least not the way we’ve come to think about salvation; as a guaranteed afterlife. No, for Wesley salvation was about the here and now, and he understood that if you’re not tending to the needs of those around you, if you’re not feeding the hungry and housing the homeless and tending to the sick and the poor and the stranger and refugee, *it’s not going well with your soul*. If your life is lived like so many people, just tending to your own needs, your own wealth, your own comfort, your own happiness, you cannot be very satisfied with your life, and finding a loophole that guarantees your eternal life is not going to give you much satisfaction in the current life. To quote Wesley:

“By salvation I mean not barely, according to the vulgar notion deliverance from hell or going to heaven but a present deliverance from sin, a restoration of the soul to its primitive health, its original purity, a recovery of the divine nature, the renewal of our souls after the image of God...”

The assurance that John Wesley had of his own salvation went hand in hand with his confidence that his soul was being transformed by the Spirit of God. Something was going on inside him that was empowering him to do things that were pleasing to God – things like feeding the hungry and tending to the sick and poor and visiting those in prison. But we also should remember that Wesley was a product of his time and place – he had his issues with women and with non-whites – and so the Methodist Church did not stop with Wesley. We too are being transformed into something better than Wesley could have imagined, and perhaps something would have been appalled by. The Church, the true Church, is always in transformation as it becomes clearer and clearer to us what is right and what is true. And to use another quote from Wesley:

“We should be rigorous in judging ourselves  
and gracious in judging others.”

We need to take a good, honest look at ourselves and recognize our flaws, our biases, our defense mechanisms, our pride and prejudice.

So Friday is Aldersgate Day, and in honor of that we call today Heritage Sunday, remembering the proud heritage we have as Methodists while being humble and recognizing how far off track we can become as a church. We have a lot to be proud of, and one of the main things in which we can take pride is that we are not a people who look for loopholes. We know God's love. We know God's grace. We know that he does not abandon us. Yet we know that our lives are hardly satisfactory if we regress to being self-focused, intent on only dealing with our own personal needs or even the needs of those we consider to more important than others. Our calling is to serve ALL others, to love ALL others, and the sooner we embrace our mission the sooner we'll stop looking for loopholes. When we embrace the truth of our own sin, our own failure to love, we can start looking for something more than a loophole. We start looking for a Savior, and when we find that Savior, we find that his name is Christ, and that his very nature is the love that we so desperately need, love we need to redeem us, and love we need to transform us so that we in turn can bring that love to others. We don't treat Jesus as a loophole, as someone who we can appeal to at the end of our lives. Jesus is someone we walk with here and now. Walk with him now and you won't be frantically looking for loopholes later.