

LITTLE THINGS COUNT
(Matthew 25:31-46)

That's the last we're going to hear from Matthew for a while, at least on Sunday morning. Next Sunday is the first Sunday of Advent, when we take up the gospel of Mark to begin a new lectionary cycle.

Let me say right up front: there's a lot I don't like about this passage. And the thing I really don't like is the idea that I'm going to be judged. Judgment is a turn-off in general. But on top of that, there's the chance that I'll be found lacking and get sent away with the goats.

Judgment offends our sense of freedom. When it comes to judgment, we would rather skip this parable and quote something else Jesus said: "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged" (Mt. 7:1). We like that because it suggests a kind of laissez faire attitude – judge not, live and let live, to each his or her own. Judgment smacks of self-righteousness. Who are you to tell me what to do? Or who am I to tell you what to do?

If nothing else, this parable reminds us that freedom is never absolute, that we're not autonomous monads. It reminds us that we are not completely on our own, no matter how much we like to pretend that we are. It reminds us that we live in community, not completely on our own. We are free, but it's freedom to choose to participate in the community or choose to do nothing.

And that's exactly what the goats in the story chose. They chose to do nothing. They weren't notorious sinners who did terrible things like murder or stealing or molesting children.

Hell in Dante's *Divine Comedy* has nine circles. The worst sinners are in the lowest circle. But before you even get to the first circle, as soon as you pass through the gate that warns *Leave All Hope Behind, You Who Enter Here*, you come to a kind of vestibule reserved for "the dismal souls of those who lived their lives with neither praise nor blame...Heaven banished them before they marred it, and even deepest Hell will not accept them." (*Inferno*, III). Since they did nothing in their lives, either for good or for evil, they are "distasteful to their enemies and to God." They're condemned to be stung by wasps and hornets while maggots drink their blood and tears. It might not be hell itself, but it's no place you want to spend eternity.

I thought about that when the Penn State scandal broke. If the allegations are true, Jerry Sandusky will find himself in the lowest circle of hell while Joe Paterno might wind up in the ante-room where the wasps will sting him as his conscience should have.

Jesus doesn't have anything quite that elaborate or graphic. He just sends the goats off to the fires of hell without any distinctions.

Of course they protest. "What are you talking about? We never saw you hungry or homeless or shivering or thirsty or sick or in prison. We would have helped if we had known it was you."

They're a lot like the employees on the CBS reality show *Undercover Boss*. Are any of you fans? I have to admit I'm not, but the premise is simple: Each week an executive leaves the corner office and pretends to be a regular employee to get an idea of how things really work, where the problems are, and who really makes the company go. At the end of the show the employees are taken by complete surprise when the boss's true identity is revealed.

In the parable both sheep and goats are surprised when they find out that Jesus has been undercover among them, scoping things out and watching what they do when nobody's looking as far as they know. Is that a comforting thought? Or is it at least a little bit scary?

"We didn't know it was you." That's the goats' first line of defense. They might have tried another argument: "We believed all the right things about you. We went to church every Sunday. We confessed you as our Lord and Savior. Doesn't that count? What more could we have done." Well, the short answer is a lot more. Jesus doesn't seem to care what either group – the goats or the sheep – believe about him or think about him or say about him. The question on judgment day isn't who *has* faith but who *does* faith. As Jesus says earlier in Matthew, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven" (Mt. 7:21).

This parable usually gets interpreted as a warning about personal behavior: What's an individual Christian supposed to do? How do we do faith? And it comes down to hospitality – how we treat our needy sisters and brothers. If we take what Jesus says as our yardstick, we won't go wrong.

But there's one little piece of this story that doesn't get much attention. Did you notice what Jesus says at the very beginning? "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..."

All the nations will be gathered before him. Is it just possible that it's not only individuals that will be judged, but entire nations? What if it's not only how you and I as individuals treat those who are least among us? What if it's how we collectively as a nation treat them? What if public morality is just as important as private morality? Where would that put us as a nation?

We hear a lot of talk about America being a "Christian nation." Forget arguments about separation of church and state; ignore all the cheap political rhetoric. How would a "Christian nation" measure up to Jesus' standard? Does Jesus care if we post the 10 Commandments in courthouses and begin every school day with the Lord's Prayer? Or does he care more about how we treat those who are least among us? And if we as a nation were judged by that standard, how would we fare? What would America look like if we applied Jesus' core principles and values to our shared public life?

The Hebrew prophets condemned society as a whole for tolerating poverty and oppression and injustice. Amos said that God despised the people's festivals and took no delight in their solemn assemblies, told them to take away the noise of their songs. In place of empty ritual and easy idle words, they were

to “let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream’ (Amos5:21-24).

Jesus stood in the tradition of the prophets who made justice and righteousness their watchword. So it’s not too much of a stretch to imagine him saying, “Forget all the pious claims about being a Christian nation. Forget all the pious words and rituals. How do you treat the hungry and homeless? What are you doing for the sick and those in prison?”

Thomas Jefferson, who wasn’t even Christian in any recognizable sense, at least believed in a God who judged not only individuals, but nations. He wrote, “I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just; that his justice cannot sleep forever” (*Notes on the State of Virginia*). Of course, he was writing about slavery and didn’t tremble enough for himself to free his own slaves. Even hypocrites can speak the truth. In fact, that’s one mark of a hypocrisy: being able to speak the truth without living up to the words.

Abraham Lincoln, eighty years later, believed that the Civil War was God’s judgment on a nation that tolerated slavery. In his Second Inaugural Address, he said God gave both North and South “this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense [of slavery] came....[and] if God will that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, ‘the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.’”

It’s probably never safe to say this tragedy or that catastrophe is God’s judgment. But is it ever wrong to shine the light of Jesus’ parable of judgment on the laws and systems we have in place?