

“Could I have a word with you?”

Maybe it’s just me, but hearing those words, especially from an authority figure, always make my heart jump up into my throat. Oh boy. What do they want to talk about? What did I do wrong? How am I going to defend myself? How much trouble am I going to be in?

It’s a little unwarranted, because it’s not always bad, is it? It’s not always something we did wrong. But the instinct is guilt, the instinct is “uh oh”. Why is that? Because that’s who we are. We are sinners and we are hardwired by God to have his law and judgment written on our hearts. We usually call that the conscience. It knows right from wrong and it lets us know when we’ve done it and also when we’ve failed to do it. And you may not have done anything wrong lately, but the conscience is wired to attack even when we had opportunity to do good and didn’t. That casts a pretty wide net.

And so the result? A little voice inside all of us that perpetuates our feelings of guilt. And so when we are confronted it is first our reaction to feel guilty and then usually right after to get upset that we’re being accused, we get defensive. Not always even because of the accuser, but because of the guilt we already feel. We want that feeling to go away so we rationalize and defend against it whenever it’s brought to the forefront.

But all of this pales in comparison to the confrontation that Jesus describes in our gospel today: <read text: Matthew 25:31-46>.

The spectacle is certain more than God tapping us on the shoulder and saying, “Could I have a word with you?” The end has come and the King has taken his seat on his throne to carry out judgment. All people of all time will be gathered before him. You will be standing in that crowd. Somehow, impossibly we will all be gathered and all see the judge on his throne. And then we will be divided. As sheep are divided from goats we are told.

Let’s not just pass over that. Because it may not be what you think. See, in the Middle East, sheep were not quite the same as what we know here. They weren’t all the white color we call to mind. They came in many colors from black to grey to speckled and even the “white” ones were darker than what we would picture. So, you see, for a shepherd to look at a mixed flock with sheep and goats and then divide them...well, it took a practiced eye and careful inspection. The layman, as it were, would not know the difference; to him, they would all look the same.

Isn’t that true? We can, with some careful observation and learning, be able to make some good guesses about who will be divided into which camp on the last day, but it’s not easy. From the outside we all look the same. And we’re certainly prone to make mistakes in this determination because while we can try to read the outward signs, the key distinction as we’ll see between the sheep and the goats here happens in the heart. And we cannot read the heart. We can’t see it so we can’t make that determination perfectly.

So there you stand on that day, in a crowd where any of them could be sheep or goats, and Jesus the King, with his practiced eye, stares through your heart and knows you. Which camp will he put you in? You’re so turned around by the awe and the spectacle will you even remember which side is the good one? His right or my right? What is he going to say about me?

Now, the Last Judgment is pictured a number of different ways in scripture, so let’s be careful here not to press any detail too literally. The broad strokes all remain the same, however. And here, after the public division of the people, the proclamation of charges and judgment takes place. So again, which judgment will be read to your group?

Will it be like those on the left? Will he accuse you for your lack of basic human decency towards him? Note that this is not a list of crimes you committed, you didn’t murder or steal (which seems to be everyone’s go-to defense to prove that they’re basically decent people), but that’s not the evidence against you. No, Christ says, I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, thirsty and gave me nothing to drink, a stranger and you did not invite me in...and so on down the line. Simple, basic human needs and comforts, and you did not act.

There have been plenty of those times, haven’t there? Times when you could have done but didn’t? Someone needed help but you selfishly felt you had nothing to spare? Not the time or the money or the emotional energy. You were afraid you wouldn’t have enough to be comfortable so you denied someone who had nothing. To our sensibilities this may just be called “mean”, but we don’t generally consider it a crime. And yet here is the evidence. You could have, you should have and you didn’t. And for that you will be punished.

Hey but wait a minute, you never saw Jesus needing that. I mean, that would make all the difference, right? If Jesus had been in any kind of need I would’ve certainly acted. He’s Jesus, he’s my God and Lord, yeah I’ll do what he asks, I’ll give him what he needs!

“You say that,” says Jesus, “But you haven’t. All those acts of basic kindness you didn’t do for others were things I asked you to do. I told you to love your neighbor. I told you to care for others and to humble yourself. Everything you should’ve done, you should’ve done it for me. And everything you didn’t do, you defied me in neglecting it. I was there in every hungry stomach, every sick child and every lonely soul that you did not offer comfort to because you were selfish. Now depart to the fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”

Looking at what Jesus had to say to these on his left, and looking back on our own lives, it can seem that this is what we should expect to hear when the day comes. Our actions and the accusations given line up pretty well with what Jesus proclaims to the condemned.

My brothers and sisters do not be afraid. Though looking at that may give us reason to reexamine our lives of faith, that is not what you will hear on that day. In faith, Jesus will recognize you as one of the righteous. He will look on you in the crowd with eyes of love and pride and he will guide you to his right. And once there he will proclaim the good you have done to him. Confused, perhaps you may wonder what he means. You did what came naturally to you, not because it was somehow God himself you were serving with your kindness, but because people were hurting and it was the right thing to do. But Jesus considers it done for him. So he invites you to your heavenly home, prepared for you from before the foundation of the world was even laid.

Now, you’ll forgive some dramatic license on my part to make a point, but when this day comes, when you are gathered up to be in that crowd, there won’t be any of that apprehension or fear. When the day comes, when the trumpet blows, in faith you will know. You will know what is coming and you will know that because of Jesus, because you know he died and rose to save you, you will know that this day means nothing but the best for you. There will be no fear, only joy. Joy because the journey is over and rest for the weary has come.

But Pastor, how can you just say I’ll be on the right? From Jesus’ description it doesn’t sound like I measure up. We always say, in fact we said last week it’s by faith alone, so how come Jesus is judging works here? Ah but that’s not what is actually happening, is it? Jesus, as he always does, as scripture always teaches, Jesus is judging faith. However as scripture also does quite often, Jesus is calling to works as the evidence of faith.

Scripture tells us that there is no one who is righteous, not even one. No one does good. If Jesus were making his determination on the works of the people, there would be no one on his right. What he is doing is identifying the faithful. He is singling out those who hold to their trust in him alone to save them and they are taken to the right. They are called the righteous. It is faith alone that saves and that is true even in Jesus’ description of the end here.

The key to understanding this is found in the ignorance of the righteous. Jesus tell them all the great things they did for him and they don’t see it. They didn’t think they were doing anything special for God. They did what came naturally to them. They weren’t trying to butter up or curry favor with the judge by being nice to him. They were caring for others because that was who they were, they just did for others what came naturally to them. That is the believer. Faith naturally produces love and that love shows itself in works. The works do not cause faith, they do not make a person saved. But as a tree that is alive blossoms, faith that exists produces works.

Now, in our lives here it isn’t as cut and dry as that. Our new lives of faith must always contend with the old miserable self that fights against it inside us. And so those acts of faith don’t always come out. Sometimes they are stifled or corrupted. That should not cause us to lose heart, because by the perfect life credited to us at Christ’s death, those acts are cleansed. In faith God does not see the failures, he sees obedience. It is not relevant whether we succeed at every opportunity or not, what matters is we have the heart of faith that says, “God, I want to live the way you tell me to. What you command I want to do, no matter what it means I may have to give up or struggle through. No matter what pride I have to set aside or selfish wants I have to give up. I may not and cannot do it perfectly, but God what I want is to do your will.”

That is the heart that Christ sees and judges. That is the attitude that comes naturally by faith. The works will not be perfect here. But don’t look to your works. Look to Christ. Christ fills your faith, warms your heart and the good that we do for him pours out of that naturally. And that will be the evidence presented at your trial. Overwhelming evidence that causes the judge to proclaim, “Not guilty!” and welcome you to the heavenly home prepared for you since the foundation of the world.

Amen.