

Sermon: Life's Just Full of Surprises

Year A, New Year's Day

[Ecclesiastes 3:1-13; Psalm 8; Revelation 21:1-6a; Matthew 25:31-46](#)

Offered January 1, 2017 to Brookline Community Church, Brookline, NH

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Happy New Year! At the moment our calendars are pretty empty, with just the dentist appointments we made four months ago. The poem from Ecclesiastes assures us that for everything there is a season (Ecclesiastes 3:1). In the Hebrew, *season* means an appointed or fixed time, which periodically occurs. *Time* on the other hand is an occurrence.¹ So today is the season for making resolutions, and today is also the time to commit to going to the gym three times a week. The passage from Ecclesiastes is reminding us that everything, *everything*, will have its own proper slot in the calendar of life.

We all know that's true. We reach certain phases in our lives and we realize that this must be one of those times to break down (Ecclesiastes 3:3) and we ride it out until we can get back to the times to build up (Ecclesiastes 3:3). We know that. It's in a part of the Hebrew Bible called the Wisdom literature and we're not surprised that it's under that heading. It *is* wisdom. It's even written down for us and has been since the Babylonian exile in 600 BCE, so we've had 2600 years to agree and admire the wisdom.

And yet life takes us by surprise again and again. I'm planting here, and those idiots are coming along behind me plucking up what is planted. (Ecclesiastes 3:2) We fight the world because we want it to be the season when our gifts are recognized and acknowledged but they are not. We're ready for it to be time for our teenagers to start acting responsibly, but apparently their prefrontal cortex doesn't think so.

According to Matthew, the surprises don't stop in this life. In today's passage from Matthew, we see a scene of the Last Judgment, the only place in the New Testament where it is described in such detail.² The sheep are being sent off on the Son of Man's right hand, being blessed. They have no idea what they have done to merit this treatment. "We fed you, gave you drink, welcomed you, gave you clothing, visited you in prison? When did we do any of that stuff?" They're not denying they did it. They just can't remember when they did that for Jesus.

Is it enough to have done the feeding or clothing or visiting? After all, that's love your neighbor as yourself. Remember that the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself comes as part two of a two part command. The first part? Love God. If you love God and follow Jesus, your heart changes. The inside changes. And over time, you are feeding hungry people, maybe directly, maybe indirectly. Maybe you're boxing up senior luncheons to go to the guys at the Transfer Station or maybe you're buying three cases of canned corn for the lady behind you in line because she was stocking up to feed the neighborhood kids who didn't get a good meal at home. You go to Paris on business and you leave 2/3rds of your suitcase including your favorite

¹Harvey H. Guthrie, Jr., "The Book of Ecclesiastes" in *Interpreter's Concise Commentary: Wisdom Literature and Poetry: A Commentary on Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, The Song of Solomon*, edited by Charles M. Laymon, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1983), 251.

²John M. Buchanan, "Proper 29 (Reign of Christ), Pastoral Perspective, Matthew 25:31-46" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY:Westminster John Knox Press, 2011], 336.

coat with the refugee family camped on the sidewalk outside your hotel. You love God and things like that happen.

And the goats are surprised too, as they trail off to the left of the Son of Man. They're shocked. They *know* they never saw Jesus hungry, thirsty, naked, sick or in prison. Perhaps they thought they had taken care of Jesus. Perhaps they thought they never got the chance to. Perhaps they thought they had done enough.³ But whatever it was they thought, they were sure that they had loved God with all their heart and all their soul and all their mind. (Matthew 23:37) That should have been enough to get them headed along the right hand of the Son of Man. And clearly it wasn't.

So what are we to do? Pretty obvious, right. Feed, water, clothe, welcome, visit. We got it. In fact, we've got a fabulous Outreach committee that will make sure that the church as an organization does some of that stuff to make sure we get more than our share done. Well, sure.

But here's the thing. Unlike the sheep, we've heard the lesson from Matthew. When we see suffering, when we see the least of these, we cannot help but see them. We follow Jesus and if nothing else, his life and innocent death have made it impossible for us not to see them. And if we follow Jesus, we see Jesus in them. So when we feed, water, clothe, welcome, visit, are we doing it because our hearts have been changed by loving God? Or are we doing it because we heard about that throne, and all the nations gathered before it, and the sheep being separated from the goats? (Matthew 25:31-32) As much as we want to say it is because Jesus changed our hearts, how sure can we be that it is not influenced by the other?

Do we try to find some way to escape this tension, some way of genuinely forgetting what we know about the sheep and the goats, trying to revert to the innocence that the sheep had in the vision of the end of the world? Or, in this new year, with our calendars empty and our hearts open to discover what season is upon us and what time it is, is it worth trying to find a new and different path?

In this fallen world, it is not possible to be as innocent as the sheep. And likely we would not want to be. So the point is not to set that goal for ourselves. We can't forget what we have learned not just in this passage from Matthew but from all of Matthew's gospel.⁴ The least of these are whom we are called to love, to guard, to stand up for. Not just because that is the right thing to do but because Christ calls us to do it. We are doing something in this world that effects what happens when this world is no more. But what we have learned from this passage from Matthew and from all of Matthew's gospel is that this world is passing away.⁵ We might as well feed, water, clothe, welcome and visit and acknowledge that we are not only changing reality in this world but we are changing reality in the next. Loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves are not two different things requiring two different sets of actions; they are the same thing. Working for the good in this world and the good in the next are not two different activities; they are the same because the two worlds are the same.

Whatever season it is, whatever time it is, loving God and loving our neighbors is one thing. With our calendars empty, we are already standing before the throne. This world is folding into the next and we need to be living in both because that's the reality that Matthew sees. It isn't

³Dan Otto Via, Jr., "Ethical Responsibility and Human Wholeness in Matthew 25:31-46." *Harvard Theological Review* 80, no. 1 (1987), 98-99.

⁴Via, 99.

⁵Via, 99.

one or the other. It's both, here and now. And given how hard Jesus worked to help us see that message, it can't be surprising.