

The Ultimate Measure of Things

Matthew 25:31-46

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.'

Kaye and I recently received a communication from a young friend. She is beginning to cultivate her own spiritual life, deciding what to let go of that no longer fits, and what to plant in the garden of her true self. Organized religion as she has experienced it no longer has a hold on her. She sees how it becomes extreme and separates people. She no longer trusts religion as she has known it because, in her view, it labels people and seeks to control knowledge rather than create deeper understanding through compassion and love. For her, God has become more real as “the universal and divine energy that dwells in all living things.” Our friend has difficulty seeing Jesus as she has been taught, as the only way people can know and experience God. What she believes now is that we human beings are sacred, endowed with responsibility for caring for the earth and ourselves. Our spiritual work is to grow more conscious of God and our true selves. She is struggling between what she has previously been taught and what she can no longer ignore--her own knowledge and experience of life, of herself, of God. What advice did we have for her, she asked?

After a day or two, I wrote to her briefly, promising a longer and more thoughtful response at a later time. I told her that it sounded to me as though she were on the right track. She is being faithful to her own experience and insight and the truth of her own life. I told her that I understood and share what she is struggling with. I encouraged her to keep moving forward with what she finds to be true.

I find such religious questioning neither new nor shocking. It is a sign of spiritual awakening and deepening. I hear these things increasingly from young people, but also older people. There is a great questioning and reassessment going on these days in religion and spirituality. Many Christians are struggling with things they were taught. They have trouble with seeing Jesus as the only way to God. They do not experience themselves or others as completely lost and no-good sinners. They do not experience the world as either evil or neutral, a place we simply pass through on our way to the next life. Rather, they experience the world as the good creation of God now endangered by our failure to live as we were created to live. There is a growing openness to the truth that other spiritual traditions offer. We are discovering that one can be a deeply committed Christian and at the same time learn from what others have to teach. Being devoted to one's own tradition does not have to lead to extremism.

I grew up in a minister's family, always hanging around the church—as a child in Sunday School, as a teenager in youth groups and singing in choirs, going to church camp in the summer, entering college as a pre-ministerial student, and so forth. Religion, theology, spiritual things always held the greatest interest for me. Yet I have found that the deeper I have gone into my own spiritual tradition, the more open I have become to what other spiritual traditions have to offer. The more committed I became to the actual practice of following Jesus, the more I recognized the truth at the heart of other spiritual traditions. Instead of making me a religious zealot or extremist, my spiritual journey as a Christian has brought me closer to those who are close to the heart of their own religious traditions. I have come to understand that Jesus was not about creating another religion. He was pointing to the heart of his own tradition, but also the heart of all spiritual traditions. We find it in the reading today from the Gospel of Matthew, as well as in other places in the gospels. It has to do with the ultimate measure of things, of what matters most. This is the last of Jesus' teachings in Matthew's gospel. We hear it on this, the last Sunday of the Christian liturgical year, which we call Christ the King, or the Reign of Christ. Jesus paints a picture of the ultimate measure, the final assessment of what truly matters.

“When the Son of Man comes,” says Jesus. It is not clear that he identifies himself with this “Son of Man” who acts on God's behalf. And it does not really matter. The point is, here is God gathering all the nations, all the peoples of the world. We can assume that this includes Israel, which would be a shock to Jesus'

audience. No one is exempt from this ultimate measuring of life. This includes us and our nation. The United States and our self-interest are not the measure of things. The rain of God's judgment, just as of God's love, falls on everyone alike. The story of the final judgment covers all nations, all individuals. No one has "preferred status."

On what basis is the judgment to be made? Here is the real shocker. It has nothing to do with what religion you proclaim or what beliefs you hold. It has nothing to do with whether you are spiritually superior to anyone else. It has nothing to do with your view of the Bible and whether you can quote a single passage from it. It has nothing to do with how passionately you hold your religious or spiritual view. It does not even have to do with whether or not you "believe in Jesus Christ"!

The ultimate measure of life according to this final teaching of Jesus is whether or not we responded to the needs of our fellow human beings—the hungry, the sick, the imprisoned, the lonely, the left out. It has to do with whether or not we lived as true human beings. The sheep, or the righteous, did these things as a natural course. They are surprised to find out that they were actually serving God or the Son of Man. They were just doing what they were supposed to do without seeing it as doing something special. The most beautiful act of compassion or generosity is that which is completely unself-conscious, that has no thought of reward or recognition or even awareness of doing good. Elsewhere Jesus taught this is not letting the one hand know what the other is doing. Those who inherit God's kingdom are those who were simply living as true human beings the way God made us to live. They did not do it to receive philanthropic awards or get their names in the paper or to receive a thank you note. They did it because that's who they were, because they did not know any other way to live.

The goats are surprised that the Son of Man identifies himself with those in need. We did not see you in need, they say. They had more important things to do. They were concerned with being right or religious or whatever. These who considered themselves righteous, no doubt, are also those who inflict suffering, physical and spiritual, on others out of their sense of their own rightness and desire for power. These are the ones Jesus spoke of when he said, "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord' and do not do what I ask?" They divide life up into religious and non-religious, sacred and profane, and are always in search of "something more" than ordinary human existence, its realities and challenges. They love religious "experiences," but miss the reality that the sacred IS the human life we share and the human need that is part of it.

I want to add that what Jesus is saying here is not even a matter of "seeing Christ in the poor and those in need." The sheep, those who live life as it was meant to be lived, did not go around meeting people's needs because they saw Christ in them. They simply saw the needs of their brothers and sisters, and responded as true human beings. To me there has always been something a little wrong with "spiritualizing" those who are poor, who are in need, that is, "seeing Christ" in them. We are to see human beings as human beings, as those who are, like us, children of God. And we then respond out of our common, shared humanity. That is the kingdom of God, life the way God made it to be lived. To me, making people and their needs into our religious or spiritual "project" is not much better than not responding at all! The sheep, or the righteous, in the story simply do what is most human, and only afterward do they find out they were serving God.

I recently read Greg Mortenson's book THREE CUPS OF TEA, which some of you have also read. Mortenson was the child of missionaries and lived a good portion of his youth in Africa. Yet he did not become a "religious" person as such. He became an adventurer, a mountain climber. After a failed attempt to reach the summit of K2 in northern Pakistan, the second highest mountain in the world, Mortenson got lost from his guide while coming down the mountain and stumbled into a small Pakistani village. There he was cared for by some of the poorest people in the world, who took him not only into their homes but their hearts. He was so deeply moved by the humanity of these people who took in a sick and lost stranger that he vowed to come back and build a school for the girls of the village. The failed attempt to summit K2 led to the attempting of another summit—the education of girls in the mountainous tribal areas of Pakistan and later Afghanistan. Mortenson learned both in Pakistan and Afghanistan that the surest way to defeat terrorism and religious extremism is education, not violence. There was another deep motivation that surfaced out of his experience in Korphe. It

was the death of his young sister years earlier, and his deep desire to do something for her memory. What better than to be part of the education of girls in that impoverished part of the world?

Greg Mortenson paid attention to his own life so that he was open to the needs that came into his life, both his own and those of others. He knew his own gifts, and was able to redirect the passion and strength that had enabled him to climb mountains into the building of schools. All of this has been done in a spirit of mutuality and cooperation with the people of those mountain villages. It is the story of human beings being true human beings. And for that reason, it is a sacred story.

The point is not that we are all to do what Mortenson has done. The point is to awaken from the dream of "religion" into the bright daylight of our humanity, of living the way God made us to live. Religion at its best points us to our true selves. At its worst, it makes us less than human. The questioning and struggle communicated by our young friend is something that all of us need to go through in order to move from religion to spirituality, from formality to life itself. Jesus was trying to awaken people to their true identities as human beings. He was suspect of religion for religion's sake and was always in conflict with religious leaders because of that. Jesus held religion in very high regard, but not as an end in itself. Religion was only the raft to get us to the shore of our true humanity.

Does this mean we give up everything about religion? Not at all. If anything, all of this points to how important religion is to our identity as human beings. But it can go either way. Religion can become the source of bigotry and violence, or it can point us in the direction of our full humanity. The bottom line is, however, not what we believe or what tradition we practice or anything else. It is how we respond to the needs of our brothers and sisters in life, especially those who are the least, most neglected members of Jesus' family. May our spiritual practice continue to move us in that direction as we follow Jesus in whom we discover and receive our true humanity.