



Westminster Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, TN
Nov. 26, 2023
The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
Sermon: "Scattered and Gathered"

Matthew 25:31-40 (NRSV)

25:31 "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.

25:32 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,

25:33 and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

25:34 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;

25:35 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,

25:36 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.'

25:37 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?

25:38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing?

25:39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?'

25:40 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.'

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24 (NRSV)

34:11 For thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out.

34:12 As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness.

34:13 I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land.

34:14 I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel.

34:15 I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD.

34:16 I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

34:20 Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep.

34:21 Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide,

34:22 I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep.

34:23 I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd.

34:24 And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken.

“Scattered and Gathered”

My former Professor, Robert Dykstra, began the academic year at Princeton Theological Seminary one year with the following story in his convocation address:

On her first day at Princeton Theological Seminary, having driven from California to begin her Master of Divinity program, a good friend of mine asked a returning student how to go about getting to New York City from the campus.

‘Oh, it’s easy,’ he told her. ‘You take the Dinky by the Wawa.’

‘The Dinky by the Wawa?’ my friend wondered. ‘On what planet had she landed?’ She asked herself that day she landed in Princeton. The Dinky by the Wawa.¹

A bit of translation is needed. The Dinky is the dinky little connecting-train that will take you to the main hub of New Jersey Transit about 5 miles from campus, where you can catch a real train to the city. The Wawa is the Northern Mid-Atlantic equivalent to a Weigels, an important landmark for any hungry student trying to find cheap food in that overpriced college town. So, if you happen to get your seminary education at Princeton Theological Seminary, the Dinky by the Wawa becomes a central part of your life, while to those on the outside, it is simply a string of nonsense words.

My former professor Robert Dykstra opened his convocation address with this story to illustrate how confusion is the basic character of the human condition. Don’t panic if you get lost along the way at seminary, he was telling the students. It’s the foundation of learning. We all get lost along the way.

Did you get lost along the way this week?
Have you been lost for some time?

I know, being lost is a hard thing to admit. You and I are the type of people who help the lost, right? To be lost is to be in need. And it’s a hard thing, to be in need.

Read in isolation, Matthew 25 seems simply to be about care-filled, powerful people who have it all together. Granted, they also get confused by the Son of

¹ Robert C. Dykstra, *Finding Ourselves Lost: Ministry in the Age of Overwhelm* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2018), 14.

Man's praise. "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food?" But overall, it is an address to the haves, in their care for the least of these:

Food for the hungry,
 Drink for the thirsty,
 Clothing for the naked,
 Care for the sick,
 Visits for the imprisoned:
 Charity to those who are a mess.

It is a powerful reminder for those of us with power and privilege, to give out of our abundance. It's the perfect Scripture of the holidays. Charles Dickens could have read Matthew 25 before writing his *Christmas Carol*.

But read in isolation, these words feel incomplete. I know, I know, how dare you say that about our beloved Matthew 25!
 Is this guy really a Presbyterian?

But hold on with me for just a minute,
 sit with me for just a minute.

In your experience, does abundance always prevent need?
 Do you always have the mental and spiritual and material resources to go out and serve?

I know that I do not.

Of course, we like to think of ourselves as Matthew's righteous sheep, but in my experience, those positions of care-giver and care-receiver are messier than Matthew seems to admit.

Who was 'the least of these' in the *Christmas Carol*, anyway? Tiny Tim and Bob Cratchit, certainly, but neither of them was as lost as Ebenezer Scrooge, were they? Perhaps the very point of that story is that those who have it all don't always have it all-together. I mean, who really has it all-together?

What about you? What about me?

A few weeks ago, my brother-in-law was visiting with his dog Murphy, a two-year-old Irish-doodle mix. At one point during the weekend, all the other adults had left, and it was me, Murphy, and my two kids at home. I was cooking dinner. My 3-year-old was watching a Disney movie. The 8-year-old son was outside playing with friends. He came knocking on the front door, needing his bike helmet. I

opened the door to let him in, and Murphy, our 2-year-old canine guest, saw his chance. He shot out the door at full speed.

I didn't know what to do. With no shoes or socks on, I ran with my son after Murphy as best we could, on to the street behind our neighborhood. Luckily, these are quiet, neighborhood streets. But we couldn't catch him. A minute into the chase, I got my barring enough to tell my son to stop chasing the dog with me. Go back and watch your sister, whom we had left standing in the doorway. I'll catch Murphy. But I couldn't catch him. He was so fast, and he would not respond to my voice. I honestly thought we were going to lose him. He kept running out of my sight; I couldn't keep up.

By sheer luck, a few minutes into the escape, Lindsey and my brother-in-law came home. Murphy immediately went to them. He and I both were saved. I was shaking when I got back to the house. Lindsey looked at me, in my bare feet, one knee bloodied from falling down trying to catch the dog, and she was like, 'What on earth just happened?'

If you happened to come upon a bewildered Presbyterian pastor shouting obscenities at a confused dog running away from him at top speed on a Saturday night, you might ask, who was the one in need in that minute? Who was 'the have' and who 'the have-not'?

Sometimes, those positions switch in a flash, and sometimes, when you look from a distance, it's even hard to tell the two apart, each one needing the other, each one, mutually looking to God. Well, I guess I can't speak for Murphy, but I know I prayed more fervently that Saturday night than I did, the following Sunday morning.

Ezekiel was a prophet some 600 years before Jesus. He was also in exile, one of those first carried away to Babylon when its empire crushed Israel in the 6th century BCE. He writes of the lost sheep of Israel, scattered by Babylon. And so, unlike Matthew, for Ezekiel, these sheep have no food, drink, shelter, clothes to give away, extra time to spend. They are scattered and in need of a shepherd:

For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search out my sheep, and will seek them out...I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered.

Ezekiel writes to a bewildered people, totally dependent upon God, after having been torn apart by empire.

So, as Matthew 25 calls us to care for the least of these, Ezekiel 34 speaks of the care of God.

We need both visions. We are not an exiled people – and we must never forget the many so exiled today, across this war-torn world. But even in the security that we today enjoy, I'll venture, no one is so entirely put together, but rather feels deeply scattered from time to time, perhaps most of the time. Setting these passages beside one another, the metaphor extends, as sheep care for their fellow sheep, they (I mean we) also all depend upon the very mercy, grace, and goodness of God, a common need shared by care-givers and care-receivers alike.

Professor emeritus of Preaching Tom Long, this week, in an article published by the *Presbyterian Outlook*, provides a timely example. He writes,

Theologian Karl Barth once provocatively said that the only appropriate attitude for a preacher to have in the pulpit is embarrassment. The reason for this embarrassment is that preachers do not possess what they are there to give: God's Word.²

In other words, a preacher is paid to preach the Word of God, but any preacher worth her salt will admit that Word is not ours to give, as if the Word of God could simply be learned and handed down, from 'the haves' in the pulpit to 'have-nots' in the pew. The Word of God is not the words on a manuscript; it is what stirs in the heart when a word written here, connects, by the agency of the Spirit, with a memory, or a question, or ache, carried there, in your heart, or here, in our collective need.

For this to be preaching, preachers need the hearts of our listeners just as much as the congregation needs faithful words spoken from the pulpit. Preaching happens when the two are joined by a mysterious Spirit that neither of us can predict or contain. Who is in need of whom, right now? I would venture we are both in need of each other, and even more, we are both mutually dependent upon God, for any of this to make any sense.

So instead of powerful people lowering themselves to care for the broken, a more faithful rendering of these passages is to see it as those-in-need caring for those-in-need, the lost caring for the lost, or rather, fellow travelers, giving from what we

² Tom Long, "The Perilous and Promising Pulpit," *The Presbyterian Outlook*, vol. 205, no. 10, November 2023, 18.

have been given, to those we meet along the way, not because we have it all figured out, but rather, because we trust in God, the Great Shephard, to use whatever we can give, however imperfect it may be.

And when we live in privilege, and we encounter those pushed to the margins by the injustices of this world, the roles of care-giver and care-receiver are especially fraught. If we eat while others go hungry, if we dress in high fashion while our neighbor curls up in an alley under a threadbare blanket, and we do nothing, who then is more lost?

Racial justice advocate Debby Irving writes at the end of her memoir, *Waking Up White*, how important humility has been to her journey to understand her place in systemic racism. Writing about conversations where she has really learned from others, meaning Black and Brown advocates working alongside her for justice, she says:

*Increasingly I am able to go into these conversations free of the need to make a particular point or make myself look good...I've freed myself from the rigid notion that I have, or will ever have, all the answers.*³

Debby Irving is a racial justice advocate who has helped open the eyes of countless, primarily white readers, myself included, about our place in unjust racist systems.

And yet, even in her role as advocate, she stands in the place of learner. The real work of justice begins, she says, not just in giving to those in need, but in learning, where these inequities came from in the first place.

I wonder, in those hard discussions between Irving and her fellow advocates, if you looked at them from a distance, would you have trouble distinguishing the haves and the have nots? Certainly, yes, the have-nots are those pummeled by centuries of inequality, but also, what about, the white racial justice advocate, still learning just how much she has yet to learn, about privilege and injustice? In those conversations, who is the lost and who is the found? The two blend together in the work of justice.

³ Debby Irving, *Waking Up White and Finding Myself in the Story of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Elephant Room Press, 2014), 240.

You don't have to have arrived before you can help someone else along the way. In fact, not having it all together, in many instances, is a prerequisite to give care, because not having it all-together creates room for mutuality. It creates room for breathing space, where we can be human together, as we care for one another. And that breathing space is a gift from God.

By the grace of God, we just have to try, and we just have to care. And God will take these, our best (but still broken) efforts, and work by the power of that transformative Spirit, to seek, and to save, and to heal.

Reading Matthew beside Ezekiel, we see, how care-giver and care-seeker alike depend upon our True Shephard, the one who seeks and saves us all, sheep of the same pasture. Amen.