

There is something kind of sad in today's Gospel reading. The people have the opportunity to see Jesus face to face, and they miss it. In reality, this is one of the most straightforward of all the New Testament's accounts of judgment; and, at the same time, one of the most fun.

Here, judgment is connected to actively reaching out to those in need, specifically to "the least of these," to those who are at the bottom, those who are the most helpless and who have no other champions, to those with no one else to care for them. These are God's favorites, the ones God sees in a special way.

And it's really clear that those who are condemned in the story are not condemned for doing bad things, or for acting unjustly or cruelly. Instead, they are condemned for the good they did not do. "Well, I never intentionally hurt anybody" doesn't really mean very much in the light of this reading. Now, we all know that the Christian faith teaches us that we cannot earn salvation, and that it comes through accepting Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. The kicker is that if we have made that decision, it will be reflected in our behavior and in our priorities. We don't do good to earn God's favor, but rather because it represents who we are as disciples.

So, let's talk about what's so sad in this story. Notice that those who have been gathered up at the right hand of the Lord, those who are called blessed of the Father, the ones we want to be, have only one thing to say to Jesus. They say, "Lord, when?" "When was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?" You see, the problem is that we think he is not here, and that he cannot see what we are doing. But he promised that he is with us always, because he never left.

Jesus told them, "I am these people. The poor you will always have with you. I am the poor. They are always with you. I am always with you. I am them and they are me. Serve me through them." We can scramble and rearrange the words any way we wish, but it always comes out the same. It is a description of what life is like in his kingdom, and you and I are the people of his kingdom. These folks, the sheep, the saved, the good guys, they were right, they did all of the correct things, but they missed the greatest joy of it. They missed seeing their Lord. They overlooked the hidden presence of God in the faces of those they served.

One of the reasons we have this parable may be to help us avoid that loss, to remind us what reaching out and caring and serving can be about at its greatest depth, because it's very clear: No matter how right we are, no matter how much we serve the presence of Christ in others, if we don't pay special attention, if we don't look for Jesus in those we serve, then, like the saved people in the parable, we won't see him, and much of the joy is lost.

The truth is that reaching out in love to the presence of Christ in others, in both "the least of these" and in those closest to us, is quite often a great big pain. It takes a lot of time, and there's almost never any indication that anything of lasting benefit has happened. What's more, "the least of these" are usually at least partially responsible for whatever problems and needs make them the least. Frequently, they aren't very nice, and worse yet, they seldom seem to appreciate whatever good we do try to do for them. So, doing good, reaching out to feed, clothe, visit, heal and otherwise minister to "the least of these" tends to frustrate us, and we tend to get burned, and to get burned out. And much the same sort of thing can happen when the ones we reach out to are not some distant "them," but are, instead, the people we live with and around, the people closest to us. Yet, often it seems to be just too much. There are too many hungry and poor and lonely people for us to make any real difference.

I have to apologize for telling a story I think we have all heard, but it speaks to this reality. Scientist Loren Eiseley was in the south of France, on the coast, attending a scientific symposium. He woke early one morning and went for a walk on the beach before sunrise. As he moved through the misty dawn he focused on a faint, far away figure. It was a boy, bending and reaching and flinging his arms, seemingly dancing on the beach. As he came nearer, he realized the youth was not dancing at all, but rather was bending to sift through the debris left by the night tide, stopping now and then to pick up a starfish and then, standing, heaving it back into the sea. He asked the boy the purpose of the effort. "The tide has washed the starfish onto the beach, and they cannot return to the sea by themselves," he replied. "When the sun rises, they will die, and the people come from town to pick them up and sell them in the marketplace I throw them back so they might live another day."

As the boy explained, Eiseley surveyed the vast expanse of beach, stretching in both directions beyond his sight. Starfish littered the shore in numbers beyond calculation. The boy's plan seemed hopeless. "But there are more starfish on this beach than you can ever save before the sun is up. Surely you cannot expect to make a difference?"

The boy paused to consider his words, then bent to pick up a starfish, whirled around and threw it as far as possible. Turning to the scientist he said simply, "I made a difference to that one," and kept dancing down the beach. Until seeing the boy on the beach it had never occurred to him how the pain and suffering and loss in the world might be dramatically altered by the simple actions of one person, no matter how small or insignificant it may seem.

But the key for us people of faith is *why* we do what we do. Cleaning the kitchen in the church, or anywhere else for that matter, is still cleaning a kitchen. Being nice to a difficult person because we are convinced that Jesus wants us to, is still being nice to a difficult person. Spending time or money or energy out of Christian conviction still means that we have freely given up that time or that money or that energy.

The Lord calls us to serve him, in our neighbors, in our brothers and sisters, in the least of these, and, often the most challenging, in those closest to us. The call is real; there are no excuses, but the Lord also calls us to *see him* in the face of our neighbors, and of our brother and sister, and, we can't forget, in the least of these. This is a spiritual call, a call to discernment as much as it is a call to action and to service.

There's no big secret or mysterious way to do this. Jesus said quite clearly that when we serve the least of these, we are serving him, that he is right there in their faces, in their eyes, in their being, but we will not see him if we are not looking for him. Imagine looking into their faces and seeing the eyes of Jesus, and we will also probably notice a smile in those eyes. We need to constantly look as we remember what we are doing, *why* we are doing it, and what we hope to come from it. We need to look for Jesus on purpose.

I don't think we take seriously enough Jesus' promise when, in Matthew 28:20, just before ascending into heaven, he said to his disciples, "I will be with you always, to the end of the age." In effect, what he is saying to us is, "I am here. Look and see." Like the people in the Gospel today we say, "When can we see you, Lord?" He answers, I am right here and always will be. Look.

So, this story of judgment is more than a call to serve. It's more than a call to be good, and to do the right thing. Sure, it's that, but it's much more. It's also a call to look, to notice, to devote our days and our lives in the search for the face of God in all that we do. It's a call, above all, to see. The result is an indescribable sense of well-being, of rightness, of satisfaction, throughout our being. Amen