

“All God’s People Gathered Together” November 26, 2023

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Matthew 25:31-46

Will you pray with me?

Gathering God, help us to trust in your loving judgement and gather us more completely through acts of compassionate service. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

Friends, I hope you have had a wonderful last week, gathering near and far and hopefully finding time to express gratitude with your loved ones or with God.

This past week I reflected on one Thanksgiving at my grannie’s home. It’s important to note that my Grannie was the family gatherer: her table was always abundant and welcoming and she set the bar with her cooking, everything was made from scratch. We had Kentucky salted ham ordered months in advance, home made cinnamon roles and mashed potatoes: the list was long. But the Thanksgiving I remembered, my Grannie looked ragged and exhausted. It was apparent to everyone that this would be the last Thanksgiving at her home; the organization and work was just too much. So my mother and my aunt came days early and worked hard at her side, three strong willed German matriarchs in one kitchen- I knew to steer

clear. Instead I added the leafs to the long cherry table in the sunroom. We spread the fine linen tablecloth and napkins, pulled silverware from the silver chest, the family China and crystal were placed. Soon the food was on the table and my mother, the Presbyterian Pastor blessed the meal with faithful words and we commenced to eating. I took it all in; the joy and the pain, the gladness of gathering in a home I grew up in, the sadness of a last meal coupled with the warmth of everyone coming together to make it happen. Not long after Grannie moved into an assisted living facility, her super-nuclear palsy stripping her of much of her prior abilities that rapidly intensified on a monthly basis.

Nevertheless, this particular Thanksgiving gathering remains one of my dearest memories. I believe St. John of Ávila unpacks the depth of that dearness when he said

A single 'Blessed be God' in adversity is worth more than a thousand acts of thanksgiving in prosperity.

Many American's understand Thanksgiving through a particular narrative we were taught. In school I remember scenes depicting indigenous peoples and pilgrims gathered around a table of abundance and peace. Yet we know, this story is not truthful. This depiction comes from a fabrication originated during the progressive era. During that time European immigrants were arriving in droves and fearing displacement, Protestant Americans pushed a "Colonial Ideology" as a new form of being "American" meant to safeguard them from displacement, like they did to Indigenous peoples. In reflecting upon this misleading narrative, Sean Sherman, an

Oglala Lakota chef and founder of The Sioux Chef and Indigenous Kitchen shares:

*Thanksgiving really has nothing to do with Native Americans, and everything to do with an old (but not the oldest) guard conjuring a lie of the first peoples welcoming the settlers to bolster their false authority over what makes a “real” American. It is a story of supposed unity, drained of the bloodshed, and built for the sake of division. Many of my indigenous brothers and sisters refuse to celebrate Thanksgiving, protesting the whitewashing of the horrors our ancestors went through, and I don’t blame them. -Time Magazine, November 19<sup>th</sup>, 2018*

Sherman words ground Thanksgiving in the colliding realities between two different nations inhabiting the same land and informed by two very different historical perspectives.

I wonder, how can we as people of faith find joy in Thanksgivings narrative tainted by violence and lies?

Our scripture from Matthew also brings about challenging questions because of three troubling words: “all the nations” which is translation of *panta ta ethne*. Theologians have long debated the interpretation of this scripture and just what “all the nations” refers to.

The classical and most straight forward interpretation of *panta ta ethne* is to reference everyone and all people in all times- it’s absolutely universal. In this reading when applied just to these verses from Matthew, the conditions

for salvation are determined by very particular actions (feeding, welcoming, visiting, clothing). This would suggest that WE are justified before God by a self-determined commitment to justice to “the least of these”. This is a “faith by works righteousness approach” which sidelines God’s grace and God’s ultimate sovereignty. We know the dominate theology found through the sweeping narrative of Jesus Christ is one in which we are justified through God’s sovereignty; through grace and grace alone, through love, and the decisive divine intervention of Jesus Christ. And so this reading of *panta ta ethne* in an isolated reading within the Matthew, is theologically misleading.

A second common interpretation of *panta ta ethne* assumes that when Jesus is speaking, he is speaking to a dominate, threatening and powerful crowd: non-Christian gentiles. Christians were a small threatened minority group asked to follow a life of poverty, hunger, and imprisonment. Having already been called to turn the other cheek (Matt. 5:39), to resist storing up treasure on earth (Matt. 6:19), they are frighteningly sent out “like sheep into the midst of wolves” (Matt 10:16). In this reading Jesus calls upon Gentiles to treat Christian missionaries with generosity. Failure to do this results in a retributive damnation to those who would deny acts of compassion and the spread of the gospel to those in deepest need. So, in this interpretation Christians find comfort in a deeply troubling double standard for salvation: standards for Christians and standards for all others, specifically, the non-Christian gentiles of the day.

And so this reading of *panta ta ethne* in the isolation of the Matthew text is also theologically misleading.

I wonder, how can we find the Good News in this parable tainted by the idol of self-determination or the evil of retribution?

One theologian writes

Christians are always recipients of the gospel and witnesses to it. Each of us is both believer and unbeliever, both commanded to care and in need of care, both judged by the son of man and identified with him in our weakness, both under judgement for our failures to pursue justice and saved by grace, both a goat and a sheep. – Mark Douglas

In this dualistic interpretation we are no longer separated from others in the same way. This is the beauty of the experience of Jesus Christ; nailed to the cross, born in a manger, flipping tables in the temple, walking in desert dirt, immersed in the Jordan, held by the arms of human parents. Jesus became us- and in this scripture, we and they and them- become “I”. The great “I Am”, “I, Christ the King” who will sit in Glory upon his throne and say ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ The focus moves away from questions of salvation to defining how a faithful relationship with Christ is enacted.

Christ's invites us to gather, to gather together in a way that brings forth a justice that is unnatural. This is scripture's invitation. A kind of gathering that crosses socio-economic and racial lines; a kind of gathering that calls forth a measure of discomfort, a kind of gathering that calls us to honest confrontation of painful histories, a kind of gathering around the one true narrative that supersedes all others: that Christ and Christ alone is King

and he will come to judge the living and the dead through Gods mercy and grace.

I have led many service trips, and I have had a front row seat to watch people's hearts changed through Christs invitation to serve others.

One high school youth shared:

*One afternoon, our group spent time at Cass community activity center for individuals with cognitive disabilities. We had so much fun bonding with the people there. One person that we enjoyed spending time playing UNO with Heysoos. He won all of the games by some logic and a little bit of rule changing...but everyone had lots of fun laughing together and we enjoyed each other's presence. A couple days later, Heysoos welcomed us to his job with his signature high fives, and it was so cool to see him there and he was happy to be with us even though we were just shredding paper.*

In reflecting upon the theological call to service, she also said:

*We serve others because it takes us out of our comfort zones and can make a lasting impact on people's lives. The Christian faith reminds us all that we are all equal, no one is more important than the other.*

Forming a servants heart helps rid us of our poisonous narratives that we are unequal in the eyes of God. Service helps unite us in a common truth: that all humanity is divine. All humanity shall come before Christ and Christ alone. That the promised glory of the Son of Man who is in ALL of us. Woe

unto those who do the separating before it is time, Woe unto those who do not serve one another with gladness, Woe unto us whose titles, status, and busyness separate us in such a way we no longer visit the sick or imprisoned, feed the hungry, cloth the naked or welcome the stranger. Woe unto us, for we would be goats!

God in Christ gathers. God gathers us together out of loving justice. All God's people will be gathered together in due time. The history of our faith in Jesus Christ, gives testimony to this future.

God Gathers the nations. All nations. United in common humanity set on an even landscape to come before The Son of Man.

God gathers you and me, through acts of service and communities of faith.

God gathers. God joins. God mobilizes. God draws together. God causes us to congregate as sisters and brothers in Christ.

In a world of division, isolation, and false narratives: this is perhaps the most powerful Good News one could imagine.

Sean Sherman, the Oglala Lakota Chef continues:

*I have not abandoned the holiday I have just changed how I practice it. The thing is, we do not need the poisonous "pilgrims and Indians" narrative. Instead, we can focus simply on values that apply to everybody: togetherness, generosity and gratitude. And we can make*

*the day about what everybody wants to talk and think about anyway: the food. Most of our Thanksgiving recipes are made with indigenous foods: turkey, corn, beans, pumpkins, maple, wild rice and the like. We should embrace this. Exploring indigenous foods has given me—and can give all of us—a deeper understanding of the land we stand on. No matter where you are in North America, you are on indigenous land. -Time Magazine, November 19<sup>th</sup>, 2018*

How do you serve others trusting that the community you enter through acts of service is Christ's kingdom, a holy interpretation of all that is united and uniting?

At First Congregational we gather believing that no matter where you are on life's journey you are welcome here. We gather because of Christ's invitation: "Come, you that are blessed by my father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you for the foundations of the earth." We gather as indigenous people and immigrants, young and old, Christian and gentile, to sit at the table of glory in wonder and awe with the lens of truth, the one and only great Truth, the truth of Jesus Christ being the table leaf upon which all our celebration and kinship rest.

What does scripture say will be our hints when Christ's gathering truly takes shape, when we sense the holy community of *Panta ta ethne*?

When we are uncomfortable. When we sit with people whose narratives are not ours. When First Peoples have first chair at the table. When the young learn from the old, and the old are taught by the young. When the very



grains, trees, and animals of the land signal our divine unity. When we find ourselves in the last place we thought we would ever be with people we would never be around- except that Christ has called us together in an act of service: serving one another.

*Panta ta ethne* will be gathered when the question:

'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?'

Is no longer spoken, rather trusting lips lift up praises, saying *Blessed be to God, Blessed be to God*- no matter our adversity.

Amen.