

“Mid-Terms or Finals?”

Psalm 100; Matthew 25:31-46

Thanksgiving Sunday, November 23, 2014

Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

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This is the time of year for final exams. While some of us are long past those days in school, others are not; and all of us recall any anxiety we may have or had about them. Recognizing this, Jesus prepared his disciples for what the **BIG** final exam would look like:

“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; 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, 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.’” (Matt. 25:34-36)

As we recognize our abundance, individually and as a nation on this Thanksgiving Sunday, it is right that the Gospel should remind us that welcome into God’s kingdom is based on our generosity in this life.

This kingdom is both temporal and spiritual. The realm of God is here, now. Theologians say it is “not yet, but already.” As a temporal realm, the kingdom is like that sumptuous Thanksgiving dinner that is not yet served but fills the house and our nostrils with aroma hours before we ever taste it. God’s Kingdom tantalizes us with the promise of “what will be” with the hope of “what is already.” We pray “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” because the kingdom, though not yet fully realized, is breaking in around us.

This kingdom is also eternal. Who has never asked “*What happens to me in the life to come?*” This advance peek at the final gives us an answer. We will be tested on whether or not we have learned to live as neighbors to our fellow human beings.

Now this may seem too simple, in a way. We might have thought the exam involved our theology or a measure of our prayer life or our knowledge of Holy Scripture. Nothing of that sort is involved, says

Jesus. Just food, drink, clothing, caring and a welcome. It is so simple, so obvious, so...so human. Why didn't we think of that?

Let me tell you something. You and I have a hard time measuring exactly how deeply God has invested in us. It's hard for us to believe God cares that much. That God comes in person astonishes us. The New Testament calls it a scandal, but it is a scandal that is at the heart of faith and the heart of a joyful, faithful life. The church father, Irenaeus, said it like this: "The glory of God is a human being fully alive." (1)

There are plenty of people who don't believe this, who are convinced the human condition is lost and the world is going to hell in a hand basket. I respond forcefully to such negative people—"shuntin' on the haters" as some young people say—people the philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher called the "cultured despisers of religion" (2). That response you have heard from me before. Each of us is literally marked with the imprint of the Divine. DNA, fingerprints, retinas—each are unique to us among 7 billion people on the planet. Although we sometimes miss the mark of our high calling we are pretty special.

And how urgent for our time! The idea that God stands against, and not for, human life is an error as formidable as it is ancient. Evil perpetrated in the name of God—think ISIS—is still evil, divine trappings aside. This rumor that God is against people, against human knowledge, against using the very tools—our mind—with which we were created has been around a long time. According to the Bible it was whispered almost from the very beginning, from scaly lips as the snake hissed to Adam and Eve, *"Can't you see what's happening here? God did okay, a nice job with the garden and all. But God is sooo insecure. God knows if you eat the fruit you'll be just like God. You'll know right from wrong, know where babies come from and how to make a wheel; understand the tax code. Most importantly, you'll learn the secret of the universe: how to program your DVD player. God doesn't trust you and you don't trust God. Have done with it and have done with God."*

(1) St. Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyon (Gaul), Against the Heresies, A.D. 175-185

(2) Friedrich Schleiermacher on Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers, translated by John Oman with an introduction by Rudolf Otto, Harper Torchbooks, New York, 1958.

Well, they didn't have done with God but they believed the lie and the story goes on to this day.

This does not surprise us from the cultured despisers. It does surprise us when those who claim to be God's dearest and closest friends murmur that God doesn't really trust us; that everything we gain is something God loses. For example, some Christians say you've got to believe in "intelligent design" because "evolution" threatens scripture. Really? My grandfather, a Methodist preacher in the 1920's when the theory of evolution was coming of age, taught that evolution and scripture can co-exist. Science teaches "how," scripture teaches "why." Some Christians say we have to be protected from certain writers, Hemingway, J.D. Salinger or even Maurice Sendak's Caldecott Medal winning children's book, In the Night Kitchen.

The way out is not backwards. We cannot undiscover science any more than we can unwrite Catcher in the Rye. The task is to use our creativity in ways that enhance and enrich life. As someone said, "God came to take away our sins, not our minds."

So where does that bring us? It brings us to a God who is looking for human partners to bring in the kingdom, and reminds us that we experience the kingdom when we fully embrace our humanity and that of our neighbors. The lie that God and we are opposed is shattered as God says, in essence, "*Salvation is as simple—and as difficult—as serving my people whom others overlook.*"

We got a boatload of ways to do that. If you didn't bring groceries today for Christian Community Action and the New Haven AIDS Project, write a check and memo it for that. Or go to Stop and Shop and buy a bag of groceries and I'll wait for you to bring it back. Or come and help serve this Thursday at our Community Supper. Or Wednesday in Bridgeport. Or visit the sick so that Dorothy Long and Andy Macri and Art Yost and others will know that not only the pastor but the church has stopped by. And when you do these things, do them without fanfare, as Jesus said in Matthew 6, "*in secret so that your father who sees in secret will reward you.*" No flexing as the hipsters say; that is,

no boasting. No “flexing in a no-flex zone,” because that is what we are: a no-flex zone, a community built on Jesus, who was not a flexer, not a boaster, but a servant who called us into a servant community.

So many opportunities we miss. Remember Jacob Marley, Ebenezer Scrooge’s dead partner in Charles Dickens’ book A Christmas Carol? Marley returns as a ghost to warn Scrooge of his fate if he does not change his miserly, selfish ways. Jacob Marley cries out from eternal torment because of the opportunities to do good that he missed: *“Oh! Captive, bound and double-ironed...not to know that any Christian spirit working kindly in its little sphere, whatever it may be, will find its mortal life too short for its vast means of usefulness! Not to know that no space of regret can make amends for one life’s opportunities misused! Yet such was I! Oh! Such was I!”* (3)

But just to be clear: if the final exam is today, I flunk. And you?

The good news is that if we’re still breathing, there’s still time. How much? Who knows? So today is the mid-term! Jesus’ notes are clear. It’s time to act. By the way, did you ever notice that Jesus gave the disciples the same message **after** his death and resurrection as the one that he gave this morning **before** it? As Ann Weems writes (4):

*He said, “Feed my sheep.” There were no conditions:
Least of all, Feed my sheep if they deserve it.
Feed my sheep if you feel like it.
Feed my sheep if you have any leftovers.
Feed my sheep if the mood strikes you, if the economy’s OK...
if you’re not too busy...
No conditions...just, “Feed my sheep.”
Could it be that God’s Kingdom will come when each lamb
is fed?
We who have agreed to keep covenant are called to feed sheep
even when it means the grazing will be done on our own
front lawns. Amen.*

(3) A Christmas Carol, Charles Dickens, Washington Square Press, New York, 1993, p. 51

(4) Searching for Shalom, Ann Weems, Westminster: John Knox Press, 1991, p. 47