

## I. Advanced Organizer

- A. Today is our last teaching in our series “**Activated Faith**” - a series in which we’re taking a look at a few of the enigmatic parables of Jesus, that he told to **activate his listeners** and provoke meaningful responses in them.
- B. As you may remember, one of my favorite go-to teachers on parables is a Jewish New Testament scholar named Amy Jill or AJ Levine. As I was doing some research for this week’s teaching, I discovered that, in addition to having a lot of fascinating insights on Jesus and the stories he teaches with, AJ Levine herself writes a pretty good teaching story. So today, we’ll start things off by listening to a bit of a parable kind of story by AJ Levine.
  - 1. *First video excerpt.*
  - 2. Ok, we’ll leave it there for now, but I promise we’ll back to her story a bit later and you can hear where it goes from there.
  - 3. I started things off with AJ’s story, not just because it’s amusing, but because it also is connected to the story we’re going to explore today. Our story for today is arguably one of the most famous and familiar parables to readers of the New Testament. But it’s also one that I think may merit a fresh view, particularly for those of us who’ve studied it in the context of more evangelical spaces. It’s a story that, as you’ll see, has a framing that connects with AJ’s, but may feel more challenging for us. But as we end this series of conversations on how Jesus might call us to grow as a Haven community in action, this story seems to me like an important part of the conversation.
- C. So before we look at our parable, I want to give you **some setup for the story** we’re gonna consider today.
  - 1. The parable we’re looking at today is found in the **Gospel of Matthew**. As you may know, Matthew devotes a lot of attention to the teachings of Jesus, and the gospel writer arranges them in five large chunks, sometimes called the “five discourses” by Biblical scholars. The discourses are interspersed within the greater narrative of Jesus’ life and ministry.
    - a) The first discourse that kicks off Jesus’ teaching in Matthew is what we call the **Sermon on the Mount**, beginning with the Beatitudes. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to them,” they start.
    - b) The fifth and final discourse takes place **right before the passion narrative**; right before Jesus predicts that he’s about to be crucified, and then half a chapter later, he’s arrested.
    - c) Each of the discourses, as Matthew has arranged them, seems to have a theme. And this final one is a series of parables that all speak to questions about **where everything is going**. Where is this whole life drama headed. Questions that are forward focused - what Bible scholars call “**eschatology**”, which means literally, “**the study of last things**”. AJ was telling an eschatology parable, and Jesus had plenty of his own.
    - d) This eschatology discourse starts off at the beginning of Matthew 24. Jesus is headed out of the temple in Jerusalem, while his disciples are marveling at the building. Then Jesus makes an eery, prophetic comment. “Do you see all these things? I tell you the truth, not one stone will be left on another. All will be torn down!” This of course, would come to pass thirty to 40 years later, when the Romans would tear down that very temple, but Jesus’ friends of course couldn’t know that.
    - e) A bit later, they come to him when they’re alone, outside the city, hanging out on the Mount of Olives and ask, “**“Tell us, when will these things happen?”** And what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” They’re asking forward

looking, eschatological questions. And **Jesus starts telling stories**. He tells a number of parables, all connected with some sort of future justice-setting event. And the discourse reaches its climax, along with the climax of all of Jesus' teaching as Matthew relates it, with our parable.

II. So let's take a look at our text, starting at verse 31 of Matthew, chapter 25.

- A. **31 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. 32 All the nations will be assembled before him, and he will separate people one from another like a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. 33 He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. 34 Then the king will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. 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 invited me in, 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.' 37 Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? 38 When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or naked and clothe you? 39 When did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' 40 And the king will answer them, 'I tell you the truth, just as you did it for one of the least of these brothers or sisters of mine, you did it for me.'**
- B. **41 "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you accursed, into the eternal fire that has been prepared for the devil and his angels! 42 For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink. 43 I was a stranger and you did not receive me as a guest, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' 44 Then they too will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not give you whatever you needed?' 45 Then he will answer them, 'I tell you the truth, just as you did not do it for one of the least of these, you did not do it for me.' 46 And these will depart into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."**

1. Ok, so I don't know about you, but for me - this is a passage that **I both love and also feel troubled by**. And I think, in some ways, that might be some of Jesus' intention. But it also is real, that compounding the troubling is that we are reading this story more than two millennia after it was originally shared, from a very different cultural experience than the original audience, and with, frankly a lot of baggage that's been attached to it through the centuries. So I'd like to try to wade through some of that today and to start, I think it makes sense to address head on the elephant in the passage - **this is a judgment text**.

- a) Of course this is not the only one in the New Testament. Matthew 25 is one of a number of texts that talk about **a future judgment and about some sort of cosmic punishment as well as cosmic reward**. It's particularly a recurring theme in Matthew, who seems to talk about divine judgment more than any other gospel writer.
- b) And I want to acknowledge, that for some of us, these judgment texts might feel really challenging to encounter, maybe even triggering; **particularly for those of us who have spent a lot of time in conservative Christian kind of spaces, where the fear of judgment may have been a major theme**. I've known Christians who were raised with a lot of fire and brimstone teaching that have experienced **genuine childhood trauma** as they shook in their beds at night fearing the fires of hell.

- c) As a spiritual community, Haven is a place that values **creating safety, honoring diversity, and centering on Jesus**. We seek to be a place of refuge particularly for folks who are trying to recover from toxic Christian spaces that have caused harm, and because that's true, I think it must be named that **the doctrine of hell and the way some Christians have used it is has caused a lot of psychological harm**.
- d) So what do we do with passages like Matthew 25, other than avoid preaching on them, which if I'm gonna be honest, has generally been my go-to?
- 2. One thing I think might be helpful in encountering texts like these is to **better understand the cultural setting** in which a parable like this is being shared.
  - a) Dr. Meghan Henning is a religion professor and scholar, who has done a lot of work around the development of the concept of hell in the Ancient World, and how that concept functioned.
  - b) In a lecture she gave online recently, Dr. Henning described the way that different cultures developed their frameworks for what comes after life, from Egyptians to Greco Romans, to Ancient Israelites to Jews in the time of Jesus.
  - c) By the time Jesus, across cultures in the ancient world, a **tradition had developed of talking about the afterlife as a way of teaching how to live in this life**. It was a powerful teaching device. We see it in the Greek Odyssey. In the Roman Aenid. And in the latter centuries before Jesus, we see it in Jewish Apocalyptic texts, a couple of which - Daniel and Ezekiel, we see in the Hebrew Bible, and many more of which Jesus and his listeners may have been familiar with.
  - d) Tellingly, one of the most learned Greco Roman philosophers of the day, **Strabo**, wrote in his work about the Hades myth, which was the Greco Roman version of the afterlife, that **people debated whether it was true or not, but for him that didn't really matter**. What was important was the usefulness of **talking about Hades in instructing children**. For first century thinkers, using the concept of **consequences in a coming life was an important tool in teaching folks how to live now**.
  - e) So the people to whom Jesus is speaking have an understanding of the world that includes some sort of coming reckoning in the next life. In much of Judaism at the time, future punishment is often associated with fire. That's not something Jesus is imparting, it's **something his audience assumes**. Dr Henning explains the implications of that this way:
    - (1) *"People will ask me, do I think that hell exists and my answer is "I don't know. My texts don't have that question. Ancient texts don't have that question. That's a post-Enlightenment question we ask of ancient texts that's unfair because it's not a question they had...For ancient thinkers, the question is not 'does hell exist?'. The question is 'who's there and why are they there?'"*
  - f) This is the framework I think it's helpful to keep in mind as we encounter Matthew 25.
- 3. It's also helpful to remember....**this is a parable**. As we've seen before, parables are naturally evocative in their imagery. They use strong visual pictures to make a point to the audiences that are listening. There's exaggeration, there's hyperbole, there's metaphor baked in.
- 4. Finally, I want to speak a word about this language that we have at the end of the parable: **"eternal judgment" and "eternal life"**. Through the centuries, there have been Christians who have pointed to that language and used it to run with a doctrine of hell that I think has been particularly problematic - what has come to be known as **"eternal**

**conscious torment**". While there are other views of how people may be judged, this view has been predominant.

- a) But does this passage argue that whatever **punitive consequence might exist in some sort of cosmic judgment** is **everlasting**, that it will go forever, just as the reward for the righteous will?
- b) Unfortunately, our English translations are getting in our way here. The Greek word that is being used here and translated as "eternal" is ***aonios***. **It's literal translation is "of the age"**, meaning connected to another era, another eon, another age. The age to come. The cosmic age. It doesn't actually mean "**everlasting**". There was another Greek word, ***athanatos***, that meant unending or everlasting, but that isn't the word being used here. Frankly while *athanatos* does occasionally appear in the New Testament in connection to future reward, it never appears connected to future punishment. While *ainios* can have connections to the eternal, the language Jesus is using is not really about duration, it's more about the source. He's describing something that's coming from the place that is outside of our time and place, the realm that is beyond us. The realm of the Divine. *Aonion* judgment is only eternal in the sense that it comes from a place beyond time, not that the judgement itself lasts forever.

C. So with all of that background acknowledged and held in mind, what is **actually happening in this story**? What was Jesus trying to provoke, using this convention of teaching eschatology in his day?

- 1. The story starts with a setting that comes straight from the book of Daniel. An apocalyptic Messianic figure called the "Son of Man" is on a throne. And before the Son of Man all nations are gathered.
  - a) All people are there, and the son of man, who is **both shepherd and king**, proceeds to sort them.
  - b) I can imagine Jesus' audience might have a certain sense about how this will go. In other apocalyptic literature, **sheep represent Jewish people**. Perhaps Jesus' listeners might expect that the sorting and punishing that's coming will mean the downfall of Rome, and the separating of Israel from her oppressive neighbors. But the **dividing isn't along ethnic lines**. It's not along **religious lines**. This is **not a tribalistic** kind of grouping.
  - c) There's also **no discussion of belief**. There's no discussion of **confessing faith**. The sheep aren't rewarded for having the right ideas about the Divine or for praying the right prayers. Confessing the right faith or having the right theology isn't what makes a sheep a sheep.
  - d) No, amongst all the nations in this parable, what distinguishes those who are called "sheep" from those who are called goats seems to be all about **the actions they have taken in their lives: specifically the actions of caring for the vulnerable**.
    - (1) These actions are repeated **four times** which I think is meant to tell us something. Jesus really wants us to focus on the actions being named:
      - (a) Giving food to the hungry
      - (b) Giving drink to the thirsty
      - (c) Inviting in the stranger
      - (d) Giving clothes to the naked
      - (e) Visiting the imprisoned

- (2) A little background on this last one - In Jesus day, people who were imprisoned were **generally awaiting trial**, not being incarcerated long-term. Eventually they were likely to be executed or sent to penal colonies. In the meantime, which could be years, they languished in often cold, dark spaces. Their provisions were generally meager, and may not have been enough for them to survive. Roman soldiers were not particularly motivated to keep the imprisoned well enough to see trial; there are stories of them at times encouraging suicide amongst their prisoners. Folks who did survive incarceration were generally **reliant on the gifts of outsiders** - family or friends who could bring them food and water and other necessary items while they awaited their time in court. But this kind of service wasn't without risk; there was always the chance that the Romans might not look kindly on the assistance provided the prisoner and decide to arrest you too.
- (3) These kind of actions, caring and providing for the poor and vulnerable, **these were the actions Jesus was calling his listeners to.**
- (4) But Jesus was doing more than calling people to care for the poor. Jesus, the shepherd king was himself **identifying with them.** "Just as you did it for the least of these, you did it for me."

- e) Jesus was saying that **he was there**, hidden in the hungry child. In the thirsty old man. In the stranger needing welcome and the prisoner needing care. He started his teaching ministry in Matthew blessing the poor in the Beatitudes. He ended it saying I am with them. I am **in** them. Remember his audience: for the bulk of his peasant, working class audience, this felt like hope and freedom. To those who knew what it felt like to be hungry, Jesus said I am with you. To those who needed a drink, Jesus said, I am with you.
- f) And if there was any doubt that this solidarity with the oppressed was more than just words, Jesus would soon make that clear. Just a few verses later **Jesus would be the one arrested.** He would be the one imprisoned, and alone without any visitors. He would be the one hungry. The one without clothing. The one who said from the cross, "I thirst".
- g) Friends, this is where I believe Jesus is trying to focus his audience. He's using the framing of a future event to do it, but that's not the heart of his message. The actions Jesus is trying to provoke are very much focused on **the here and now.** Who are the vulnerable among you *today*? What can you do to care for them *today*?

III. I want to end with a couple of core take-aways for us from our passage as we wrap this series on "Activated Faith", considering what Jesus might be activating in us.

A. First, I encourage us to recognize that **all of us are capable of missing Jesus.**

- 1. In the parable, neither the sheep, nor the goats saw the Son of Man in their midst. Both groups were surprised to hear he had been there. This should be a reminder to all of us not to be overly confident in our capacity to discern the presence of the Divine. All of us are capable of missing Jesus. We might be too caught up in the everyday pressures of life, the real concerns we're all managing, or we might be distracted by all the messages competing for our attention. Whatever the reason, I think this story invites us to at least ponder how, like the sheep and the goats, we might miss noticing the Divine's presence in our midst.
- 2. The good news is, the story also makes clear that the sheep didn't need to discern the Divine presence to do the right thing. They saw the humanity of the people in front of them, and they allowed their hearts to be moved. In the same way, though we may not notice God showing up in any given encounter, we can attend to the human being in

front of us. We can hear their needs. We can allow ourselves to be moved. And in so doing, we just may be encountering something sacred.

B. And this brings me to my other takeaway: **Concern for Jesus means concern for the vulnerable.**

1. As we've named, Jesus goes beyond calling his followers to serve the needs of the vulnerable and oppressed. He actively locates himself within them.
2. Here at Haven, in places like our retreat, we've been having conversations around exactly it means for us as a community to be centering on Jesus. **When we say we want to be "Jesus-centered" what do we mean?** Perhaps **this is part of what it means.** Perhaps part of what it means is that we are actively **engaging our world in a way that's attending to where here and now is there vulnerability?** Where is there hunger and thirst, both physically and emotionally? Where are there lonely seeking invitation? While all of us are capable of missing Jesus, perhaps our call to be Jesus-centered invites us to attend to the places of oppression and vulnerability as the best pathway to discover the Divine among us.
3. We are now over a month into a devastating conflict in **Israel and Palestine**; one that has already included unfathomable destruction, trauma, and loss of life, with no clear end in sight. Compounding the grief we may feel is also the tension we may be drawn into as various groups we interact with call us to choose a side. Who are you with? Are you with Israel or Palestine? But I think the call of this story asks us to take a view that isn't at its core about national identity or tribal affiliation. If we ask where is Jesus here, **I think we're called to notice Jesus in multiple locations.**
  - a) Jesus is with the **kidnapped hostages from Israel**, subjected to terror by Hamas, along with their families and other loved ones who fear for their safety and long for their return.
  - b) Jesus is with the **Palestinian child** whose home has collapsed under Israeli rocket fire, while they watched their little brother be crushed by the rubble. Jesus is with their parents fleeing for safety, traumatized by the loss of a child but desperate to find safety for the rest of their family.
  - c) Jesus is with the **Israelis who have had to leave their kibbutz** after a hundred of their community members were brutally massacred, and now they find themselves in a hotel miles away, trying to set up a temporary school for their kids. Jesus is with this community of strangers seeking welcome and a space to collectively process their trauma.
  - d) Jesus is with the **hungry and thirsty in Palestine** who cannot get food or water because their access to basic life-sustaining essentials has been cut off by the Israeli military.
  - e) Jesus is with the **rabbi in the United States** who is frightened to attend synagogue because of the increase of anti-semitic threats reported.
  - f) Jesus is with the **Imam who is scared to lead Friday prayers** at the mosque, as they too have experienced threats to their spiritual community.
  - g) **I could go on and on.** The headlines each day are filled with too many tragedies to comprehend. Tragedies in Gaza. Tragedies in Israel. Tragedies in connected communities around the world.
  - h) We can and should debate policy and imbalances of power and consider the impact of the generations of historic, systemic trauma that are have impacted Palestenians and Israelis that have gotten us to this moment. But as we do so, **we cannot ignore**

**the cry of the hungry or thirsty, the needs for welcome and refuge for so many** who have now been forced to flee and become strangers. Perhaps to be Jesus centered means **centering our concerns where Jesus did**: on meeting the practical needs of those around him and calling others to do the same.

4. The last takeaway I'll offer is this:
  - a) **Our actions in the here and now, attending to the challenges in front of us, have impact beyond what we can see and experience.** However we understand Divine judgment, at it's heart I believe the message is that evil does not have the final word. The Divine is in the process of making all things new. The Divine longs to wipe every tear from every eye. And each act that we do to wipe away the tears in front of us are part of the sacred endeavor. **Our actions somehow do have cosmic consequences.** They are connected to that other realm, that eternal source, where justice must rule. We can participate here and now in the divine kingdom coming. A cup of water given to a thirsty soul has an eschatological impact. That act of mercy has ripples into the future.
5. I'm going to end our time by **giving the last words to AJ Levine**. If you remember, we stepped away from the story when the televangelist was asking Peter why AJ was allowed to be there, and Peter went off to get some help. So let's end today by letting her finish her story, her own parable of eschatology.
  - a) *Play second video*

#### **Questions for Reflection and Conversation**

1. How has your faith background influenced how you may have heard this "future story" before? How might that feel different now?
2. Have you had experiences of "missing Jesus"?
3. What does Jesus identifying with the "least of these" mean to you?