



“Undercover Boss”  
Matthew 25:31-46  
Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones  
November 20, 2011

The vivid color photograph on the cover of the magazine showed a small child screaming in agony from hunger. In the article that followed, the writer who had seen the boy at a refugee camp in Sudan described the scene: “A small boy stands at the head of a throng of naked children – and screams. In the blazing afternoon sun, his sweat and tears mingle and run down his cheeks. Falling to his chest, they trace salty trails down his body, which hunger has shrunk to half its normal weight...He screams uncontrollably, a cry for mercy that no one hears...The din of several hundred voices drowns out his pleas for food.”

The article was filled with staggering statistics that numb the mind. The writer offered no simple solutions, noting that the catastrophe was caused by a mixture of race, religion, politics, weather and war. Such stories often leave us feeling helpless and reasoning: If the leaders of a country choose armed strife over feeding their people, why should we bother?

The next issue of the magazine brought a different kind of tragedy. The letters to the editor protested the decision to use the graphic photograph of the little boy on the magazine’s cover. One reader called the photo “pornographic” and accused the magazine of sensationalism. Another wrote in to say that even his mailman thought the cover was in poor taste. One woman said that she could not bear to see the picture sitting on her coffee table.”<sup>1</sup>

We look away from scenes we would rather not see and we avert our attention from unsettling truths. Similarly, we turn a deaf ear to passages of Scripture that question our priorities and make us feel guilty. This morning’s gospel lectionary reading for the final Sunday on the Christian calendar is one of those passages we would rather ignore. Yet we ignore it at our peril because it declares a core conviction of Christianity.

How many of you know of the television program, “Undercover Boss?” In this show, CEOs from different companies step out of the normal routine of running their business to go undercover and find out what’s really going on in their companies. The executives work alongside their employees who think this unfamiliar person is simply a new hire. The bosses “see the effects that their decision have on others, (they see) where the problems lie within their organizations and get an up-close look at both the good and the bad while discovering the unsung heroes who make their companies run.”<sup>2</sup>

At the end of the show, the CEO reveals his/her identity and the employees are stunned to discover that their boss has now seen their work first hand. The workers who do a good job are

grateful that they have a solid work ethic and the boss recognizes it. Those who weren't living up to expectations are surely thinking, "If I had just known it was the boss, I would have given my best effort."

What happens in the TV show is similar to what happens in today's lectionary reading from the Gospel of Matthew. "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. 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." He welcomes the sheep into God's kingdom, but denies access to the goats. What is the basis for his judgment? He's been working undercover, observing their efforts.<sup>3</sup> Some have done a stellar job, but others have been found lacking.

The passage is not reporting on an event that has taken place, but rather is a vision of the day when God judges the manner in which we have conducted our lives. It is similar to a poem that cannot be dissected by taking each line as literal truth, but must be understood by the overall impression it conveys. Art lovers would best understand the passage to be much like a painting whose details combine to produce an overall portrait.

I find this passage to be one of the most riveting scenes in all of Scripture. Christ sits on a throne and all the nations are gathered before him. The first thing we note is that the passage does not say this is a gathering limited to Christians only. Neither is the gathering only of Christians and Jews. The passage makes no distinction based on religion. The gospel writer declares that people of *all nations* are gathered before Christ.

Once all are gathered, he acts like a first century shepherd, who at the end of the day separates the sheep from the goats. And he says to the sheep, "You are the blessed ones; you are the ones who inherit God's kingdom; because my stomach was swollen with hunger and you fed me, I was dirty and thirsty and you gave me a drink, I was odd-looking and unknown, but you welcomed me, I was so poor that I was wearing worn-out rags from Goodwill and you clothed me, I was sick with a fever and you took care of me, I was in prison, ashamed, and wearing a bright orange jumpsuit and you visited me."

And the response of these people is fascinating. They do not exchange high-fives and shout, "Yes, we did it!" Instead, they are perplexed. There is a puzzled look on the faces as they question Christ: "Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty? When was it that we saw you a stranger?" Christ responds with those powerful words that have thundered down through the centuries: "Whenever you did it to the least of these, you did it to me."

A core conviction of Christianity is given birth: whenever we are compassionate to anyone in need, we touch the very life of Christ. As the passage continues, we discover that the reverse is also true. Whenever we fail to care for one who is in need, we snub Christ.

This passage rattles the theology of anyone who thinks that all that really matters is what you believe. Did you catch what the passage says about faith? What do you need to believe in order to be a sheep rather than a goat? The passage does not mention a single word about faith. In fact, faith is conspicuous by its absence. Christ separates sheep from goats not on the basis of what we believe but on how we treat people in need. It's right in line with what Jesus says at the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount. He says, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven."

Like photos of children in the horn of Africa who are starving, this passage disturbs those of us who enjoy many of the comforts of modern living. We feel guilty that we do not make more personal sacrifices to help people who have no home, no money and no food. Did you know that there are more hungry people in the world than the combined populations of the

United States, Canada and the European Union? One out of every four children in developing countries – that’s nearly 150 million children – are underweight.<sup>4</sup> Yet one of the greatest problems facing the citizens of our nation is obesity. We argue over which diet is most effective while millions cannot imagine the luxury of choosing between protein and carbohydrates.

I will never forget an experience I had when I went to Haiti several years before their devastating earthquake. I visited an impoverished village where the children had bloated stomachs and little more to eat than sugar cane. A small Haitian man, who was missing most of his teeth, came up to me and said, “I heard that in America you have diet dog food. That’s not true, is it?”

He could not imagine that while his children were slowly starving, people in our country were feeding their pets diet food because they were overweight. I could not tell him the truth. His words penetrated my soul and I felt guilty because I knew I could do more to feed people who are hungry.

Many people invest great effort into insuring they never feel guilty about anything. They were raised on the mantra that all guilt is bad. But guilt can be a gift. As psychologist Willard Gaylin observes, guilt is the guardian of our goodness. It reminds us that we feel pain not only for ourselves but we also hurt for others. Guilt can motivate us to do what we ought to do; it can be the match that strikes the spark of transformation within us.<sup>5</sup>

If guilt devastates our ego and leads us to think that there is nothing we can do to make a positive change, then guilt is a destructive force. It is a dark power that distorts our true identity. We must always remember that we are created in the image of God and loved as God’s children. Feelings of guilt cannot destroy those basic facts of who we are. Guilt is a force for good when it pushes us to correct our failings and live as Christ calls us to live.

The picture of Christ separating the sheep from the goats ought to get under our skin and compel us to consider the direction of our lives. And not simply the direction of our individual lives, but our lives together as the Body of Christ. Are we – this community of faith called Westminster – living up to what our beautiful banners remind us are the essentials of our faith? Are we serving people in need? Are we showing hospitality to strangers? Are we caring for those who are wounded? Are we seeking justice?

This passage ought to remind us why it is critical for us to support the ministries of our church with our financial gifts and our personal talents. Westminster is a positive force in the world changing people’s lives.

Christ wants us to be filled with a spirit of compassion so that we will never be indifferent to people who are in need. He wants us to become increasingly aware of those who are hurting and to feel compelled to respond. He wants us to understand that no act of kindness is too small and no merciful deed is insignificant, because every loving gesture to a fellow human being is felt in the heart of God.

The next time you extend love and mercy to someone in need, take a close look into the person’s face. It might not be who you think it is. I have it on good authority that Christ has a reputation for working undercover.

## NOTES

1. Barbara K. Lundblad, “Does Jesus Want Another Thanksgiving Basket?” on the Day1.org
2. From the *Undercover Boss* website, a CBS television program.

3. Thanks to Christine Chakoian for this insight in “Living the Word,” in *Christian Century*, November 15, 2011, p.20.
4. The United Nations’ World Food Programme statistics found at [www.wfp.org/hunger](http://www.wfp.org/hunger)
5. Lundblad, “Does Jesus Want Another Thanksgiving Basket?”