

“Remembering who we are”

November 20, 2011

Text: Psalm 95, Matthew 25:31-46

I.

Some time back, when I was pastoring a church in San Diego County, I was heading off to a lunch appointment that I was dreading. I was pretty certain that the person I was having lunch with—who had said we needed to talk—was upset with me about something. I wasn’t sure what.

In any event, as I was leaving the office, I casually mentioned to my office staff, who knew I was a little anxious about this get-together: *Hey, people, pray for me.* Without hesitating, my secretary, who had a sense of the situation, piped up: ***remember who you are.***

She couldn’t have given me better advice.

And if we think about it, when we’re confronted with challenges and tough decisions in life, when we find ourselves in situations of potential tension and conflict, ***remembering who we are*** is good advice for us most of the time—in all that we do? It is good for us as individuals, as families, as communities, as a nation and even as stewards of planet earth?

Sometimes we need to be reminded who we are because, easily, we forget. We forget our history, our traditions and our faith story and commitments. When we’re not careful and wise, we get lured into superficialities and wrong-thinking. We get drawn into short-term responses to long-term problems.

II.

In recent decades, and particularly since the early 80’s, we Americans have lost something of our spirit—of the spirit that made us who we rose to become at the peak of American triumph and virtue with the allied victory in World War 2.

- Since then, with American supremacy in the world pretty much universally recognized, we’ve been trying to figure out our proper role in the world.
- For sure, we became a great nation ... the most powerful nation on the planet ... with abundant wealth and an enviable capacity for innovation, creativity and that most prized American commodity, opportunity and upward mobility.
- Everybody wanted to *come to America*.

But we didn’t ascend to this level by accident, friends.

- Historically, we have always been a people of goodness, a people of fairness and justice, and a people of compassion and generosity.
- At our best, we care about the little guy because, very likely, somewhere in our story, we, or our ancestors, were that little guy ourselves.
- We all have our stories of hard work, personal sacrifice and upward mobility.

But what was central to all of this was the equality of opportunity that was a part of the American experience.

Our own Declaration of Independence set the tone at the dawning of our nation:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all people are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are LIFE, LIBERTY and the pursuit of HAPPINESS. (That's us)

III.

A sense of *equality* has always been a cornerstone of the American experience. And it is precisely the erosion of this equality that is feeding the winds of the social protest movement, *Occupy Wall Street*, that have been blowing across our nation in recent months.

What are these protesters upset about? Well, CHECK IT OUT: Since 1982, the share of America's income held by the top 1 percent of the population has more than doubled to where, today, this top 1 percent make 25% of our nation's income and hold 39% of our nation's wealth.

Moreover, to further point out the increasing *disproportion*, in the 1970's, corporate executives earned about 40 times as much as their lowest-paid worker (still close to the norm in many parts of Europe). Now they earn more than 400 times as much. That's a startling statistic—a tremendous blow to economic equality.

As Union Theological Seminary professor, **Gary Dorrien**, points out in a recent article in *The Christian Century*, one of the things *Occupy Wall Street* wants to make clear is that:

This top 1 percent plays by different rules (i.e., taxes and corporate loop holes) and has been able to make fantastic gains while everyone else has fallen behind.

The truth is, friends, inequality is not only not good for the poor—it's not good for anyone. It fosters a tense environment where—in the end—everyone is hurt. **Time's** *Rana Foroohar* (a columnist on economic matters) says:

Unequal societies have lower levels of trust ... higher levels of anxiety and more illness. They are also at risk for greater social instability.

And so, what happened to us? What happened is that, almost without noticing, we got drawn in to the politics and the prosperity ethic of the early 80's (i.e., smaller government, lower taxes, less regulation) where continued upward mobility and pursuit of the American dream came to be seen as an entitlement. Increasingly we became a culture driven by illusions of endless prosperity and *the good life*.

However, without reasonable oversight and regulation, American society, and particularly the business sector symbolized by *Wall Street*, became increasingly defined by greed—which led eventually to the *housing bubble* that burst open a few years back, sinking us into the mess we are in today.

IV.

Speaking truth to power can be a daunting task. And yet, truth telling is at the core of biblical prophecy and biblical teaching. The Bible urges us to have the courage to tell the truth about ourselves.

With this in mind, let's see what our reading this morning from **Matthew 25** might suggest to us about the realities of *the disproportion* that—everyday—are more descriptive of American life.

- In the Bible, the caption above this scripture reading says: ***The Final Judgment*** or, in another translation, ***The Judgment of the Nations***.
- This *judgment* picture that Jesus paints for us is rich with metaphor; yet, unmistakably, it points the finger as well.

When the *Son of Man* comes in his glory ... and *all the angels with him* ... then he will sit on his throne ... and *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 ...

CHECK IT OUT! And he *will put the sheep at his right hand* ... and the goats at his left. This is harsh, *judgment* language.

- Clearly, in this scenario, the *sheep* are the righteous ones; they're the good guys; and the *goats* are the unrighteous, the bad guys.
- What this is all about is—apparently—Jesus has been watching (Jesus, on behalf of God). Jesus has been checking us out.

V.

I'm not much of a fan of *reality TV*, although I used to get into **American Idol** when they got down to the final twelve or so. But apparently there's a *reality show* out, now, called **Undercover Boss** where, each week, this *Undercover Boss* follows a different executive as they leave the comfort of their corner office for an *undercover* mission to check out, first hand, the inner workings of their companies.

While working alongside their employees—*undercover*—they see the effects their decisions have on others, they see where the problems lie within their organizations, and they get an up-close look at what's really going on with their companies, both good and bad.

In this **final judgment** story in Matthew's gospel, much like the *Undercover Boss*, Jesus has been checking us out. With the sheep, off to his right, he's exceedingly pleased. And we're just hoping that's us. Let's find out!

Come, he says, you that are blessed by God, and 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 drink ...**
- **I was a stranger and you welcomed me ...**
- **I was naked and you clothed me ...**
- **I was sick and you took care of me ...**
- **I was in prison and you visited me ...**

And then these righteous will answer him, *Lord, when was it that we did all these things?* When was it that we fed you and gave you drink? When was it that we welcomed you and made sure you had enough clothing? And when was it that we took care of you when you were sick and visited you in prison?

And the KING will answer them: *truly I tell you, just as you did it to **one of the least of these** my brothers and sisters, you did it to me.* (powerful stuff)

VI.

In **remembering who we are** as Christians ... as human beings ... as Americans ... as community members and family members, how would Jesus think we are doing in 2011 on behalf of **the least of these**?

1. With hunger ... health care ... housing ...
2. With prison life and conditions in the prisons ...

3. With immigration where, amazingly, some of us seem to forget that we or our ancestors all came here from somewhere ... and that immigrants have historically been one of the great strengths of our nation.
4. With the education of our children and youth ... and the way, in recent years, we've been financing college education through student debt. It's not uncommon for undergrads these days to have fifty to eighty thousand dollars of debt; or for lawyers, for example, to have a law school debt of \$140,000 or more.

This *final judgment* story of Jesus is more than a little compelling, isn't it? Because it suggests that there are consequences to what we do or don't do on behalf of ***the least of these***.

Remembering who we are, as Christians, as Americans and as members of our community and members of our family ... raises before us the prospect of *equality* upon which our nation was grounded.

And if we're truthful, we know when things aren't fair.

1. We know when things aren't right with our banks ... and with our corporations ... and with our government.
2. We know when our leadership—on multiple levels—are not doing what they should be doing in job-creation across our country.
3. We know when our educational system isn't close to being what it should be. (Did you know that, in a recent survey, we rank 17th in the international community. We used to be number one.)

WE KNOW. And we know that the bottom line in all of this—the driving force of our lives—is NOT money ... and it's not financial security ... and it's not success as defined by the world.

What we know is that it's relationships ... it's love of family and friends. It's compassion for the vulnerable, the weak, the needy, those beaten down by the sheer inertia of life. Again, we know.

VII.

And so let us, in this season of Thanksgiving, let us **remember who we are**.

1. Let us resolve to lift up the best of our traditions ... the best of our faith commitments.

2. Let us resolve to build a tomorrow that rests on the highest values of our past, while being open to the sweeping changes that are already shaping our future.

Let us build a future that is worthy of our children and grandchildren—where opportunity and freedom to pursue happiness abound, and where commitment to greater equality and compassion for the little guy are on the front burner.

When we **remember who we are**, friends, we are able to rejoice with the **Psalmist**:

*O come, let us worship and bow down,
Let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!
For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture,
And the sheep of his hand.*

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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