

“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 will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. 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.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’”
(Matthew 25:31-40, NRSV)

Thank you, Marley and Karen. As is the case every week, Christopher puts a lot of time, effort, and hard work into his sermons and prayers. He also engages in careful reflection and thought, calling to mind many of your needs and experiences in the congregation. Unfortunately, that work is now spoiled by what I'm about to say. But to honor Christopher's great compassion and care for this congregation, I'd like to read the prayer he had written and prepared for this morning. So, let's pray together.

Prayer

Almighty God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we gather here today with hearts full of worship and reverence, grateful for your presence among us. Lord, we confess that we are often overtaken by fear. We fear failure and success, rejection and acceptance, loneliness and intimacy. These fears can lead us to hide our true selves, to build walls instead of bridges, and to cling to false securities. We confess that we have allowed fear to dictate our actions and decisions, keeping us from fully trusting in your promises. Forgive us, Lord, for our lack of faith and for the times we have neglected your goodness and presence in our lives. We are grateful for your boundless grace and forgiveness offered to us through Jesus Christ. Thank you for your mercy, which is new every morning, and for your faithfulness that never wavers. Despite our failures and shortcomings, you invite us back into your loving arms, assuring us that nothing can separate us from your love. We are thankful for the hope and redemption we find in you.

We lift to you those who need your special care, hope, or healing. For those who are sick, we ask for your healing touch. For those who are grieving, we ask for your comfort. For those who are struggling with anxiety, depression, or fear, we ask for your peace that surpasses all understanding. Strengthen them, uphold them, and fill them with your presence. We pray for our world, where so many are facing violence, injustice, and suffering. We ask for your intervention in places of conflict and for your justice to prevail

where there is oppression. God, we especially pray for Yates Baptist Church. Inspire us as a congregation to raise our voices together in seeking what you desire for us and for our community. Give us the courage to love what you love and to be a beacon of hope and a source of strength to those around us. May we support each other and grow together in unity and purpose. As we prepare to share the Lord's Supper together, we ask your blessing on this sacred meal. May it be a time of deep reflection and communion with you. Help us to remember the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Empower us through your Holy Spirit to live out the faith with courage and authenticity, sharing your love and grace with those around us. In the name of Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

Sermon

Well, in a moment, we will get into the familiar passage of scripture that Karen and Marley so capably read. But before that, I would like to share a story from very early on in my first marriage, which is my current marriage. When Joanna and I were engaged, we did something called premarital counseling. If you don't know what that is, that's where a soon-to-be-married couple meets with a pastor or other advisor type figure and talks through proactively some things one may experience in marriage, both good and bad: what to celebrate, what to look out for, how to live together, how to join lives together. We did this with the pastor of a church that I was attending at the time, who is actually now the pastor of a church just down the street on Watts Street.

We got together at a restaurant, and the pastor started things off pretty simply. She turned to me and said, "Danny, why do you love Joanna?" Bonnie, do you have a question? Okay. Speaking of, if you were at Sunshine this past week, the book study, you heard this story already. So, the pastor turned to me and she said, "Danny, why do you love Joanna?" Right away, some possible answers came to mind. But right away, I questioned saying them out loud, because they were not great answers upon even the slightest further reflection. I thought of things like, "I love Joanna because she makes me happy," or "I love spending time with her." And those sound great, but also they're about me. If I love someone because of the way they make me feel, ultimately, that's about loving myself. So, I realized those aren't really great answers to a pretty simple question.

Then another part of my brain took over, and I realized that I had not responded in quite a few seconds. When someone asks you a question, if you take a while to respond, it can look like you're guilty, hiding something, or about to be dishonest. So part of my brain said, "Danny, you just need to say something. Anything coming out of your mouth is better than silence." That's a little foreshadowing.

So again, the question was, "Danny, why do you love Joanna?" And this was my response in real-time: "I don't know."

Yeah, so pretty good response. I've had some time to think about that question. Two Mondays ago, when we were at Passport, it was our 18th wedding anniversary. So, I had

time to think through that question. I have prepared a couple of responses. Now, I don't preach from notes because I'm a slow reader, but I wrote this down because I wanted to make sure I got it right. If I had to do it all over again, this is the thorough, all-encompassing answer that I would give: I love Joanna because when we met, a biological trigger was unlocked and I realized that together we could ensure the survival of our species for one more generation.

Okay, judging by your laughter, that does not seem like a satisfactory response. So I have another one prepared: It would be mutually beneficial for both parties for us to spend significant time together in the future. Given our different approaches to life circumstances, I am a risk-taker, and Joanna's cautious nature could prevent me from harming myself or others in the future, or also saying words or phrases that would make me unemployable. Joanna tends to be a rule-follower. I can help her stretch her boundaries. For example, when we go to a restaurant, rather than getting Fettucine Alfredo every time, she may explore the menu a little better.

Both really good answers. I kid. Those are intentionally awful. Now, while everything I said in those responses was factual, accurate, and true, when we define love so concretely, with no room for relationship, personality, or mystery, we do a disservice to what love actually is. Love cannot be defined in mechanical terms, in a black-and-white understanding. To describe love, to define it so concretely, is to not define it at all; it betrays what true love is.

And yet this simple thinking is, I think, the temptation of the church. We have the life and death of Jesus, a full life, a life full of nuance and mystery. We have the story of God's people in the Old Testament, one of faithfulness and lack of faithfulness, commitment, betrayal, and recommitment. We are tempted to reduce these stories and these experiences to a set of propositions: Do you believe this? Yes or no? Do you understand this? Yes or no? Here are the rules. Do you obey them? Yes or no?

It is very tempting to define faith in very simple terms. But much like defining love in such mechanical terms is not love at all, defining faith in such a black-and-white way is no faith at all. Asserting to a bunch of yes or no answers is not what faith is, and we certainly see this in the life and ministry of Jesus. I've mentioned before, it came up in Sunday School with youth and children this morning, Jesus did not teach in a black-and-white way. The primary way that Jesus taught his would-be followers was through parables. "Here's a story, hope you understand it." Now, that story could be interpreted, reinterpreted, or misinterpreted. On one occasion, Jesus said after telling a parable, "Let those who have ears to hear, hear." "I hope you understand this. I hope you give it attention, but if not, that's okay." That is not how churches often operate. "Tell me, do you understand this? Do you believe this?" And that is just not the way of Jesus.

And we see this in the passage that Karen and Marley read from the Gospel of Matthew. In this passage, we have a parable. It is the final teaching of Jesus to his disciples before the

Passion Week, his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. So you would think it would be really important. One thing to note is that it is not a judgment based on belief, but on actions. "I was hungry, you fed me. I was thirsty, you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger, you welcomed me. I was sick, you took care of me. I was in prison, you visited me."

Note, too, the response of the faithful in this passage. It is one of confusion. "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you? When did we see you thirsty and give you something to drink?" And so on and so forth. And the response is, "When you did this to the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

So even those who faithfully followed the way of Jesus, the righteous ones, were confused about it. "Wait, when did we do that?" Not having a full understanding of what following Jesus really is. So, the temptation for us is to define faith so concretely, so black-and-white, to define it in such a way that it is not faith at all.

So what I want to do for us this morning, briefly, is reimagine this passage in a different context, more contemporary to us. It's one that I actually used at the chapel service for the Boys and Girls Club this past week. It would go something like this: The Son of Man comes to earth with his angels in all his glory and sits on his throne. All the nations are gathered before him, and he separates people as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. To those on his right hand, he says, "Come, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was lost, and you saw me, you found me, you welcomed me." And the righteous will say, "Lord, when did we see you lost and welcome you?" And the king will respond, "When you included the left-out person in your group. When you sat next to someone in the cafeteria who was all alone. When you played with someone who had no friends to play with. When you helped someone find their way who was lost. When you did this to the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

Our faith is much more about faithfulness than it is about definitions. It's much more about trust than it is about right or wrong answers. It is about relationship, connection, and engagement. And my hope and prayer for us as a congregation is that we would embrace that, that we would not try to define things too concretely. That we would embrace the way of Jesus, which is not always clear-cut, but it is about engagement, commitment, and relationship.

So, let us go from this place, embracing the way of Jesus, seeking to be faithful, knowing that our understanding will always be incomplete, but our commitment and love can be whole.

Amen.