

Matthew 25:31-46
“Out of Our Comfort Zone”
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Roslindale Congregational Church, UCC, Roslindale, MA
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Introduction:

In this passage, Jesus describes how, at the fulfillment of time, the actions of human beings will be evaluated. This also helps us know what we should do today.

The Reading:

³¹ “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. ³² 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, ³³ and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴ 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; 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 welcomed me, 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 was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ ⁴⁰ 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.’ ⁴¹ Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴² for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ ⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ ⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ ⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

The sheep did what they were supposed to do. When Jesus Christ came into his full leadership, he commended them. The songwriter Jewel puts it this way: “In the end, only kindness matters.”¹ Out of kindness, those that Jesus designated as sheep used who they were and what God had given them to meet the needs of their neighbors for comfort and justice. They fed the hungry, gave the thirsty drink, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, took care of the sick, and visited the imprisoned. And as it turned out, when they did so to others, they found out they had actually comforted Jesus.

¹Jewel Kilcher, “Hands,” 1998. From the album, “Spirit.”

Basically, **this biblical scene in Matthew is also what your RCC Directional Statement intends to help you accomplish:** to bring who *you* are to bear on the needs of your neighbors in Roslindale. *Show the slide.* (This statement does not exclude meeting other needs, or those *beyond* Roslindale, but it *focuses* your efforts here in ways that you may not yet have done.) *Remove the slide.*

Matthew shows that the church's purpose is to comfort and partner in God's love and justice – to meet specific needs, material and spiritual at the same time.

Upon a first reading of Matthew 25, it seemed to me as if these sheep had no trouble figuring out how to accomplish their purpose; as if they already knew who they were, who their neighbor was, and what needs were calling out for their attention. The scripture text is written as if the sheep did what they were supposed to naturally, easily, simply, and serenely. But this lack of detail is a matter of style, consistent with a religious vignette. A teaching text like this one doesn't tell us everything; it is boiled down to the end result – the moral of the story.

So you can be sure that in a real scenario, some of these sheep, if not all of them, felt out of their depth. Before they served those in need around them, they were probably uncomfortable. Think about it, no one is perfectly at ease seeing the Naked; it brings up in us feelings of vulnerability and maybe even shame – out of their comfort zone! These faithful folks were also not in Prison themselves; to do these visits, they had to go into the institutions that were designed to provoke fear. In other words, if they were going to tackle mass incarceration issues, they would be out of their comfort zone! Plus, who doesn't think twice about nursing the Ill, especially these days with the infectious nature of the Delta variant? Out of their comfort zone.

Therefore, I wouldn't be surprised if as a congregation of Christ, you feel at least a bit out of your element when you contemplate addressing the three Roslindale needs highlighted in your statement! For instance, "Health and Wellbeing" might include taking care of the sick as well as offering the opportunity for enriching worship experiences. But if you consider the needs of the poor for health care in our society, this huge issue could be more intimidating – out of your comfort zone.

"Food and Financial Insecurity" is a need partially met through the Food Pantry, but volunteering there, you might become more acquainted with the pressures that the unemployed and those living on minimum wage endure. Interacting more closely with these people could also increase *your* feelings of insecurity or helplessness. "What if my bank account was near zero?!" Sure, that's uncomfortable.

It is clear, too, that Roslindale lacks affordable housing and that racial injustice is at work in this trend. Trying to impact this problem can also be daunting.

Yet, this is *exactly* where Jesus Christ calls his flock! **He compels us to go out of our church buildings and into unfamiliar avenues of interaction and service.** He wants us to meet the businesses, the civic organizations, and the public in *their* comfort zones, like when we offer them fliers for next Sunday's worship service to be posted on their windows. Jesus calls us into spaces where we are uneasy, into situations of vulnerability for which we feel ill-equipped, and wants us to be open to unexpected relationships with people from different walks of life. Albert Einstein remarked: "A ship is always safe at the shore – but that's not what it's built for." **A church that that steps**

out of its own comfortable routines is a church full of joy and growing – doing what it’s supposed to do.

When my husband and I were doing urban ministry in Paris, we met Esther and Abijan Duah from Ghana. Abijan had been the chauffeur of a high government official, but when his boss was assassinated, *he* became a marked man and had to steal away on a cargo ship. It didn’t dock in England, but France, and there he was, at the mercy of a new country. Abijan later called for his family to join him.

I really was not the best person to steer an immigrant family through the French system of subsidized housing; I was surely out of my comfort zone, but I spoke English and enough French to pass. I could commiserate with their vulnerability, and I could go to these apartments with them and at least get their name on the list.

RCC, certainly you will need to learn more about these three Roslindale needs. You’ll also have to make strategic choices. It will involve some degree of struggle together, but **it is possible to follow Christ’s call out of your comfort zone!**

A journalist on 9/11 said that as people ran for their lives from the towers, he recalled looking into the eyes of those covered in ash. It was this kind of powerful connection that inspired so many actions of solidarity that horrible day!

So when I boil it down, Matthew 25 is not really arguing for a “general humanitarianism,”² but for you and me to look into the eyes of the stranger and see yourself, your friend, your loved one, or Jesus. In fact, **when we perceive *Jesus* in the ‘Other,’** it becomes easier to empathize, and to act with kindness, justice, and extend the comfort that he commands and commends.

²M. Eugene Boring, “The Gospel of Matthew,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. VIII* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 455.