



The Universality of Christ
Matthew 25:31-46
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Each summer, the Virginia Conference United Methodist Women host a conference wide event that has recently changed its name to be called “Mission Encounter.” Previously, it was called the “School of Christian Mission.” Co-sponsored by the Conference Missional Ministries Board, the three-day event is designed to offer an educational experience around how to live with a missional focused mind. Each year, they offer a few different topics, from which you get to choose your personal study. They have covered topics such as our relationships with Native Americans, the peace and justice issues between Israel and Palestine, justice in relationship to climate change, the ministry of missionary conferences within the United States, and many more. Along with offering three to four studies for adults each year, they have also provided a youth course each year.

For four years, just after graduating college, I had the opportunity to teach the youth class at the School of Christian Mission. It was always a fun event to gather with the youth, and to lead them in creative and meaningful ways to learn about justice issues around the world. One of the years, the youth topic was titled ‘Globalization.’

Just consider for a moment the joy I must have had sitting with sixth – twelfth graders in the early days of the millennial generation, attempting to teach them about how we as individuals are so intricately connected with billions of other people around the world through our practice of consumption. From a digital and social media perspective, such a global community makes perfect sense to such a group. But from a material consumption perspective ... looking at where our shirts, shoes, book bags, computers, iPhones, beard oils, and water bottles come from ... well, that was a more difficult task.

Globalization, generally discussed in terms of a worldwide economic connection, refers to the shift from the localized industry to a world wide net of industrial productivity. It defines the mindset of corporate executives, in both small and large companies, that claims there is no place in the world off limits to expansion if it helps the financial bottom line. For example, about 25 years ago, there was a toy manufacturer with a factory in China. As the Christmas season was fast approaching, the company was demanding higher output to meet the expected holiday demand. They told the young female workers on the manufacturing line they had to work fourteen hour days, seven days a week. Chinese government officials tried to step in and speak up on behalf of their laborers. In response, one of the executives for the company reportedly claimed, “We told them, this is the toy biz. If you don’t allow us to do things our way, we’ll close down our Chinese factories and move to Thailand.” The Chinese officials backed down.¹

In such a model of global expansion, whether we have the wherewithal to see the connection, we are a lot closer to people around the globe. In this way, the global community is shrinking. We are more intimately connected to people around the world because of this worldwide model of production, in which the clothes on our back, the food on our plate, and the carpet on our floor were produced in

another country by people we will never meet ... and for many of us, people we will never give two thoughts about.

One of the effects of the shift toward a more globalized world, is that the world is shrinking. “Globalization sees the world through homogenizing eyes in a way that ultimately dissolves all differences into the same.”ⁱⁱ In this way, the shrinking of the world invites more universality among the nations. A person can have a hamburger for lunch at a McDonalds in New York before flying to London, where they get off the plane and order that same hamburger from a McDonalds for dinner. You could plane hop around the world and eat at Pizza Hut each time you landed. The great diversity of the world seems to be shrinking as major companies attempt to unite us in our habits of consumption.

Yet, at the same time, the global market is expanding. “No question that the new economy has produced an abundance of goods for those who can afford to purchase them.”ⁱⁱⁱ The beverage market is a good example. The number of craft beers, wherein each brewer creates a unique blending of ingredients is not simply increasing, it’s multiplying exponentially. And even the simple drinks, like orange juice, are out of control. You can’t just write OJ on the shopping list any more. You get to the store and you have to decide, do you want pulp free, some pulp, normal pulp, or with extra pulp? But it doesn’t stop there. You have to decide, do you want calcium enriched, fresh squeezed, organic, home style, heart wise reduced sodium, low acid, high fiber, added Omega 3, Kids OJ with added Vitamins A, B, C, D, and E, Florida grown or Australian grown, or do I want the Antioxidant Advantage Orange Juice? And you know as well as I do, you have a preference. Whatever you do, don’t come home having bought the wrong kind.

With so many options to choose from, from our preferred taste in OJ, to our preferred color and style of jeans, to our preferred model and engine size in a car, even to our preferred worship style and size in a church – for all the choices we have, “it is easy to forget that all the variety tends to fade into the one overriding imperative to consume.”^{iv} Corporations know this, and they play on the offering of options to drive consumption.

There was a small family microbrewery who for generations had been brewing and serving beer near Milwaukee, Wisconsin. To help generate business, they ran a series of advertisements with “down-home folks sitting around the company’s garage-sized warehouse.”^v In response to their ads, Miller Beer ran a competing ad, “touting the virtues of good old macrobrew, [saying,] ‘It’s time to drink beer made in vats the size of Rhode Island.’”^{vi} One would think that the multiple options gave the consumer a choice. ... What you don’t see in either of the advertisements is the hidden reality that the microbrewery is owned by Miller, and in turn, both are owned by a South African conglomerate. “The surface appearance of diversity in fact masks a stifling homogeneity.”^{vii} We are made to believe that we have this great diversity of choices; yet, at the core, much of this supposed diversity is offered for the economic growth of businesses and corporations that are capitalizing on our desire and willingness to purchase more expensive and more varied products. Even in our expanding marketplace, there is an often unseen monotony.

Even as I loathe such stories that point to the economic gain for companies to market individualism while universally profiting from this model of global similarity, I have to admit, it is perhaps a bit unfair

to stand in the pulpit and critique such a model. Seeking a universal mindset around an eternal truth is the definition of a global church. In a Christian sense, we have a special term for this global community joined as one – we call ourselves the catholic church. Not a capital ‘C’ Catholic, like the Roman Catholic Church, but a lowercase ‘c’ catholic, which we use to talk about the church as a whole. We use this word in our affirmation of faith, the Apostle’s Creed, saying, “I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy **catholic** church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.”

The church has not always lived out our understanding of a catholic body in faithfulness, and perhaps at times, our example of globalization was worse than the economic model that undermines the world today. For example, in the 16th and 17th centuries, the church-led Inquisitions sought to combat heresy through executing those who taught and believed falsely. Thousands lost their lives at the hands of Christian catholicity. Even in our own nation, Christian missionaries used force and death as scare tactics to convert people to Christianity. John Smith is quoted as having said the Native’s priests and chiefs should be killed, or there would be no hope of conversion for the Natives to Christianity. The early Christian settlers kidnapped the Native’s children and forced them into ‘missionary schools,’ where they would teach them Bible stories and the English language; they would take away anything that reminded them of their Native heritage, dressing them in ‘appropriate’ clothing, and giving them new English Christian names. By taking the children at a young-enough age, they had no power to fight back. These are just two examples of **MANY** wherein the church took into their own hands the forcible creation of a catholic – universal – Christian ideology.

Not that I need to explain why such a mentality is unfaithful to God’s call on our lives individually, or on our call corporately as the Body of Christ, but our text in Matthew 25 today provides for us a better way to understand Christ’s teaching on how to understand the call to a globally catholic church.

In our passage, Jesus is teaching using a vision of the eschaton – that is, what will happen upon the final return of Christ and the full reign of the kingdom of God. He has been teaching on the kingdom of God, using the Parable of the Bridesmaids and the Parable of the Talents. According to Matthew’s Gospel, this is the final story Jesus offers before he is betrayed, arrested, and tried by Pilate.

Jesus says that as the Son of Man comes in glory, as the kingdom of God is brought to full fruition, the nations will be gathered before the Lord. They will be separated as the shepherd divides the sheep and the goats. Perhaps this agricultural metaphor is unhelpful to our suburban minds, so let’s unpack this. In caring for the sheep and the goats, the shepherds would mix the sheep and goats during the day as they grazed in the fields. It made it easier to watch and care for them all. As evening came, the shepherds would return back home with the sheep and the goats, and the sheep would be left in the fields, for they had coats thick enough to keep them warm in the cold nights. The goats, who were more susceptible to the cold, would be taken inside to the warmth of the barn. In this agriculturally based world, sheep were more valued than the goats. This teaching by Christ is not lost on his listeners who lived in this society. The sheep and the goats are separated, and the sheep are put at the right hand – the favored of the flock.

Jesus will say to those at his right hand, "You are the blessed, and you shall inherit the kingdom of God, for you fed me, gave me drink, clothed me, welcomed me, and cared for me when ever I was in need." These five actions were typical Jewish works of mercy;^{viii} they would have been well understood as actions of faith by the crowds to whom Jesus spoke. Yet, these righteous people will respond to the Lord saying, "What? When did we see you in need do these things to you?" The Lord will respond, "Just as you did it to the least of these who are member of my family, you did it to me."

Then the Lord will turn to those at his left hand, saying, "You are the accursed, and you shall perish in eternal fire, for when I had need, you did not feed me, give me drink, clothe me, welcome me, or care for me." And they will respond, saying, "Lord, when did we see you hungry, or thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, or in prison?" And the Lord will respond, "Just as you did not do it for one of the least of these, you did not do it for me."

This text has long been used by preachers and teachers as a scare tactic to teach faithful Christian living. If you *do these things*, you will inherit eternal life. But, if you *do NOT do these things*, you will perish eternally. Using it as a scare tactic is perhaps not the best use of this text. "Matthew's depiction of the last judgment is [better understood] like a wellness check. Its purpose is not to condemn or scare but to provide a snapshot of our overall health, development, learning, and growth that should lead to new habits and ways of life."^{ix} This passage is Jesus' invitation is to consider how you are living your life today, "because how we spend our time and whom we actively love and do not love provides a diagnostic image of our overall health."^x

This is not simply a scare tactic to faith, but it's also not something that says you can achieve salvation simply by feeding, clothing, caring for, and welcoming those in need. This is not Jesus' way of claiming your good works will earn you a place at the right hand among the favored sheep. To better understand Jesus' teaching, we have to look a little deeper. At face value, to claim it is the good works that offers those at the right hand salvation is to focus on the differences between the two groups. One group did things, the other group did not. But what if, instead, we focus on what makes the two groups more similar. Did you notice that both groups responded to the Lord the same way, both asking the question, "Lord, when did we see you hungry, thirsty, naked, a stranger, sick, or in prison?"

Neither group had seen the face of Jesus anywhere. "Their behavior is different, but their perceptions are the same."^{xi} Neither saw Jesus in the faces of others. The second group seems to have been looking, but claims they never saw Jesus in the faces of others, perhaps asking with the emphasis, "When did we see *YOU*, Jesus?" And the first group seems surprised that they were supposed to be looking, asking instead, "When *DID* we see you, Jesus?" If not about their action, or even being able to recognize the face of Jesus in others, perhaps, "The difference between the sheep and the goats in this story is not a matter of seeing the face of Jesus, but [recognizing all persons as God's beloved and simply] visiting people and taking care of them."^{xii}

When we take away the natural impulse to read the text as a call to glorify ourselves, naming all the times we've been among the sheep in feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger, and caring for the poor and the imprisoned, we are able to see the text isn't about our glory, it's about the glory of God, who created each person in the image of the

Almighty. Instead of implementing a globalization model that tries to unify everyone around a common model of consumption, Jesus' invitation is to see each person, with their uniqueness and diversity, as a person in whom God is already present. In this way, Christ is the universal, the center that unites us, regardless our diversity. "If we are to coexist with others on a shrinking planet, we must learn to appreciate the otherness of the other."^{xiii}

The glory of the universal and catholic church is not that we can force the masses to be of one mind, of one practice, or of one theological conviction. To be part of God's faithful creation and to be part of continuing the work of God in the world, we don't need everyone to think the same, look the same, do the same work, drink the same Orange Juice, read the same book, or wear the same clothes. The glory of globalization in the life of the church is that we can celebrate that amidst our vast differences, amidst our varied cultures, and despite our mental confusions, when we come as the catholic body to the table of Christ and join together in the Eucharist, we are joined as one. In the creation and work of God, in the incarnation of God in Christ, in the eternal glory of the Lord, our petty differences are not something to be vanquished. But instead, we are to celebrate the individual, for in each individual, Christ is there, whether you *see him* or not; truly Christ is there, whether you *are looking* or not.

For the glory of God, we give thanks for the Universal Lord, who calls us to his table, who unites us in love, and who invites us to share in communion with each of God's created, here and around the world. Amen.

ⁱ William T. Cavanaugh. *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire*. Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} Thomas D. Stegman. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Year A, Volume 4*. Eds. Barbara Brown Taylor & David L. Bartlett. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011.

^{ix} Lindsay P. Armstrong. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Year A, Volume 4*. Eds. Barbara Brown Taylor & David L. Bartlett. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011.

^x Ibid.

^{xi} Richard W. Swanson. *Provoking the Gospel of Matthew: A Storyteller's Commentary*. The Pilgrim Press: Cleveland, 2007.

^{xii} Ibid.

^{xiii} Cavanaugh.