

World Communion Sunday October 1, 2023

Matthew 25:31-46

“Kick the Can”

1. I have a memory, when I was probably in first or second grade, of playing outside on the street with kids from my block.
  - a. The game was “kick the can,” which is a kind of hide-and-go-seek game.
    - i. We’d gather as the sun went down, and while there were streetlights coming on, the big trees casting wide shadows, the cars parked on the street, and bushes and fences etc. gave us plenty of places to hide.
    - ii. In this game, one person seeks, and the rest go hiding
    - iii. Instead of counting to 100 with eyes closed to let people hide, we’d take a clean empty can (think a strong steel can like what chili beans come in) and we’d place that can in the middle of the street (it was not a busy street at all), and one of us would kick it down the street as hard as we could. We would scatter to hide quickly, while the seeker ran to get the can, bring it back on its place, and start looking for people.
    - iv. As the seeker finds people and brings them out of hiding, there is the exciting possibility that one person would come out of hiding without being detected by the seeker, and would sneakily go up to the can and KICK IT AGAIN! That meant that ALL of us would get to run giggling back to a hiding place, and the seeker would have to start all over again!
    - v. We would play that game for what seemed to me like hours.
  - b. I was just a little kid. I wasn’t a popular kid. We weren’t rich. But I got to play. Because EVERYONE on the street got to play.
    - i. And it wasn’t just kids my age.
    - ii. There were older kids too (we always hoped they’d come out of hiding and kick the can so we could run and hide again!)
    - iii. It was a mix of families representing a number of professions; it was a mix of ages, it was a mix of boys and girls.
    - iv. No one was there to tell us: only play with the kids who are getting good grades, or the kids whose parents have a new car, or kids who go to your church.
    - v. For that matter, no one told us to play only with kids who didn’t have fancy clothes, or kids who only had one parent, or kids who had been held back in their year in school.
    - vi. We played with ALL the kids. It just came natural to us.
2. The story of the sheep and the goats in today’s gospel has to do with how we play with ALL the kids in the block. More than the block: the neighborhood. More than that: the town!

- a. Basically, Jesus is saying: if you've been paying attention, you know that God really cares about those people who get pushed to the side, those people who aren't allowed to be part of the larger community.
  - b. And God doesn't like it when people in need get ignored, or get blamed, or discriminated against.
  - c. And so, in this parable, the ruler rewards those people (he calls them the sheep) who were in relationship with people who were hungry and thirsty, in need of a home and clothing, who were new to town, who were in jail or in the hospital.
  - d. "The sheep" played with everyone. And because they played with everyone, they helped each other out.
    - i. Notice that it doesn't say if "the sheep" had money for food or not, or if they were also sick or not, or if they had recently been in prison or in the hospital.
    - ii. All we know is that "the sheep" were supportive of all, including those in need, which is why God noticed and brought that up.
  - e. On the other hand, "the goats" weren't so welcoming
    - i. "The goats" were the kids who didn't want to mix with the "unpopular" kids, or who didn't invite the kid with the broken leg to play with them.
    - ii. We don't know if "the goats" were the popular kids or not. We just know they didn't welcome all.
  - f. The meaning of this parable is even more complex than that, because it is talking about nations of the world, not individuals. Did you catch that?
    - i. Think of it like whole countries being called sheep or goats depending on how THE WHOLE COUNTRY related to its own people.
    - ii. This pushes us to think of systems of oppression or of welcoming.
    - iii. It pushes us to think past just what one person does privately.
  - g. So, to go back to my example, the parable is talking about the whole block from my infancy, not the behavior of one or a two of its residents
    - i. The block was welcoming and open! I don't know how but it was!
3. If we think about how we're doing in being the people God wants us to be, we can't just think about our individual behavior, but about the way our block, our neighborhood, our town, our country are being the people God wants us to be.
- a. We can't just think: I gave a dollar to that person at the corner.
    - i. We have to think also: how can our town make sure that person has food, a job, and a place to call home.
  - b. We can't just think: I don't treat people with dark skin or foreign accents unkindly or unwelcomingly
    - i. We have to think also: how can our town act in anti-racist ways, and give full opportunities to immigrants with or without immigration papers?

- c. Collective tasks are harder than individual tasks, but they become possible when the culture of the block, the neighborhood, the town, the country, matches the values we as individuals profess.
  - i. The key there is to build on the welcoming and inclusive strengths which may be part of our culture, say as a church, and try to impact with that the culture of a larger group, say as a neighborhood.
  - ii. It's not about shaming someone or about passing a new law, but it's about sharing what we care deeply about and looking for partners.
  - iii. It's about starting a game and inviting all to participate, and not stop until we're all in the game.
  
- 4. Reflection questions
  - a. Share a story about a group of people you've been a part of which was uniquely welcoming and inclusive.
  - b. In today's gospel, Matthew 25:31-46, we hear about the ruler dividing the crowd based on how a group had acted towards others. What do you picture when you hear the actions of those sent to the right and those sent to the left?
  - c. This parable isn't about actions by an individual, but the actions of an entire group (here called a nation). Does that change the way you look at the parable? And, how are the actions of an individual part of this story?

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/last-judgment-2/commentary-on-matthew-2531-46-5>

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/last-judgment-2/commentary-on-matthew-2531-46-9>

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/last-judgment/commentary-on-matthew-2531-46-2>