

Good Guys
[Matthew 25:31-46](#)

Lent 5

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April 7, 2019

Will and I have just started the fifth season of a TV show called *The 100*. It is our current guilty pleasure. We're obsessed with it. On the surface, it's a teen sci-fi drama. As is often the case, the 16-and-17-year-old characters are portrayed by youthful adult actors. For some reason this causes Will and me no end of delight. "Shall we catch up with our thirty-year-old teenagers?" we like to say.

Here's the premise: sometime in the not-too-distant future, a nuclear apocalypse has wiped out most life on earth. About 400 people live on the *The Ark*, a space station orbiting the earth.

But after a few generations, the *Ark* is falling apart. Their oxygen-generator-thing is breaking down. They can't stay up there much longer.

In order to determine if earth is habitable again, the adult leaders send 100 incarcerated juvenile delinquents back to the ground. They're guinea pigs, essentially. If they can make it, the rest will follow.

The teenagers *do* survive and immediately encounter other survivors of the end of the world, tribes of people known collectively as "Grounders."

Thus begins a very long and morally complex struggle for survival. The survival of individuals, the survival of families, the survival of communities, the survival of humanity itself. Resources are so limited, and the characters are constantly in competition or forming alliances or betraying each other. The show tackles really challenging ethical issues like population control, cultural relativism, fascism, the

relationship between justice and mercy, and whether it is ever acceptable to sacrifice one life in order to save many.

Beneath everything is a deeper concern: does the human race deserve to be saved if we cannot maintain our humanity, even in the harshest of conditions?

Basically, this show is *Lord of the Flies* on steroids. With romance.

Approximately three times per episode, I'd estimate, characters find themselves in these impossible situations, faced with a terrible moral choice, and sometimes they even wonder aloud: "Are we the good guys?"

This could be another way of saying, "Am I a goat or am I a sheep?"

When you listen to the passage from Matthew we just heard, do you find yourself wondering the same thing? Would you go into the line for eternal life or eternal punishment? It's hard not to go there in your imagination.

I found myself thinking of *The 100* as I read our text for today. Now, the writer of Matthew could never have imagined that dystopian, futuristic world, but I wonder if he would have understood its emotional landscape.

See, Matthew was a Jewish follower of Jesus living in a time of profound social unrest, a time which included the Jewish-Roman War and the destruction of the Second Temple in the year 70. Many followers of Jesus, Jewish and Gentile alike, believed that the world was, in fact, coming to an end. Soon. Any day now. And that belief is reflected in the literature they produced.

And our text today is a small example of that apocalyptic literature, with its rich symbolism, its stark dualism (you're either good or bad), its moral urgency, its focus on final judgment.

Now, think about this: another meaning of “apocalypse,” especially in the biblical context, is “revelation.” A revelation is a revealing, a disclosing, an uncovering of truth and wisdom, God’s wisdom. The end of the world, biblically, doesn’t mean that everything stops. It means that the veil is pulled back, and God’s Kingdom is finally made plain. The world is reordered according to God’s will. In the imagination of biblical writers, this new world will be so different, so transformed, we will hardly recognize it.

For a people like Matthew’s community, a people who are suffering, terribly, in the midst of things like occupation and war and destruction and exile, the end of the world—the world as *we* know it, the world as humans have made it—isn’t *exactly* a bad thing. It’s a scary thing, for sure, but it’s but also a holy thing.

We can’t know how much time the writer of Matthew thought was left but the answer has to be: not a whole lot.

And here’s the amazing thing, the thing that captures my imagination: if you think your time is limited, you could just say: “Screw it. I’m gonna do what I want.” That happens on *The 100*, actually. When faced with almost certain extinction, one group of teenagers decide to party like it’s 1999 because, they insist, nothing matters anymore.

That’s not where Matthew goes, however. No, our Gospel writer does the opposite. He wants to make the case to his audience that it matters *more than ever* what they do.

Now remember, Matthew’s audience is a community of Jews living in Syria almost forty years after Jesus’ death in Palestine. It’s extremely unlikely that any of them, including the writer himself, ever knew Jesus in person. Matthew bases his writings on earlier things he’s read and on stories he’s already heard, but not his own experiences.

How do you convey to a new generation that Jesus' life-giving word is still alive, here in this place? How do you speak to the critical need for God's presence, right now?

You tell the people that Jesus, Emmanuel, God-with-us, *is still here*, just incognito, and you give them directions for how to find him.

“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... 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.”

These directions—they are timeless. They moved hearts 2,000 years ago. They moved hearts 1,000 years ago. They moved hearts yesterday. They will move hearts tomorrow.

Now, I'm not going to pretend that it is always easy or straightforward to follow these directions. It's not. It's simply not. These are not directions like the kind your GPS narrates to you (and to be frank, even those aren't always reliable either). Matthew's directions for where to find Jesus are subject to different interpretations and a wide range of ethical considerations.

I'm not talking about the high drama found on *The 100*. But, to have any kind of privilege and power means, at some point, you will be faced with a hard choice about how to use your resources. I know I feel that pinch every time I pass by person begging on the street. Do I give a dollar now? Do I donate to an organization working to end homelessness? Do I do both? Do I do neither, choosing to allocate my resources somewhere else?

But personally, I don't think Matthew actually wants us to move through our days, a moral calculus always going in our minds and hearts, trying to do the “right” thing, trying to be a “good guy” instead

of a “bad guy,” so that when the time comes, we are herded with the sheep and not the goats. To live that way is exhausting, for one, and a bit inauthentic, for another. It puts us and our fate at the center of the universe, not God, and certainly not the “least of these.” It turns compassion into a performance, with one eye on ourselves.

Part of the point of this parable, after all, is that the Righteous didn’t even realize when they were encountering the King himself. They have to have it explained to them later. Matthew wants us to realize: who are we to presume that we have exclusive rights to eternal life, or righteousness, or even redemption itself? I think Matthew is urging us, instead, toward a reorientation of the heart.

Think of it this way: the Bible asks us, again and again, what does it mean, *truly*, to live? What does it mean, *truly*, to perish?

Biblical faith has a strange, peculiar, paradoxical take on these questions, and it’s our work to struggle with that paradox, and give it a priority in our lives. I’m not talking about accepting a set of dogmas or doctrines. I’m talking about the decision to commit to a whole new way of framing reality. I’m talking about risking a faith that speaks to our deepest hopes but which also faces our worst fears.

We don’t live in the world of Matthew, the Gospel writer. And we don’t live in the dystopian world of *The 100*, either. We live here, now, and we have our own choices to make, every single day, about how to be in relationship with God’s creation. Our choices affect everything, from how we interact with our friends and family and co-workers, to how we vote and engage in activism, to our charitable giving, to how this church uses its resources of time, talent, and money.

We won’t always agree on the best way to serve “the least of these.” That is to be expected. Sometimes our visions will clash, and we will be in conflict. Sometimes the sheer magnitude of suffering in the world will make us want to turn our faces away.

But I believe we can stay dedicated to the work, and find our way through this challenges, if we remember who the work is for: we are laboring *not* on behalf of the sheep and the goats, but on behalf of “the least of the these,” to whom Christ pledged his solidarity, to whom Christ revealed himself, and who, in turn, reveal Christ to the world—in any time, in any place.

The stakes *are* high. But they’re not high because we’ll be punished eternally if we do the wrong thing. Faith, *real* faith, is not about avoiding punishment. Real faith is not about trying to stay safe and comfortable and pain-free.

Real faith is about recognizing that, in the end, sometimes there is no easy way to separate out the goats from the sheep from the “least of these.” Real faith is about freely choosing compassion, welcome, and generosity not as a ticket to righteousness but as a way of life *together*.

There is an expression in mystical Judaism—*tikkun*. It means to restore, to heal, to mend. A Jew’s task in life is to participate in *tikkun olam*—the mending, the repairing of creation. The idea is that it is a task given to us by God. Each of us has a particular gift for restoring the world, a way of repairing that is mine or yours alone. And likewise, according to the sages, each of us has a particular point where we need our own *tikkun*, our own mending.

What is your *tikkun*—your own gift for healing, *and* your own place which needs to be healed?

May God bless us all we wrestle with these questions. Amen.