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*Matthew 25:31-46*

Ile de Jean Charles is on the coast of Louisiana.

It's the home of the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw Tribe.

It's in that part of the state

where "land" is an ambiguous category.

And the 99 people who live there

have the dubious distinction

of being America's first climate refugees.

Their land is 98% underwater now.

And so, they're trying to figure out

whether there is any option to stay,

or whether they have to leave -

to relocate from the lands

on which they've lived for generations,

and on which their way of life depends.

They're not alone.

Inupiat communities in western Alaska .  
face a similar decision as coastal erosion  
caused by the loss of sea ice and more intense storms  
threatens their villages and their way of life.

Portland, Oregon, meanwhile, has become an unlikely new home  
for climate refugees from Micronesia,  
where small islands are becoming  
uninhabitable as sea level rises.

And many of the migrants from central America,  
the *human faces* of the humanitarian crisis  
at our southern border, are fleeing climate change, too.

Years of drought followed by destructive floods  
have devastated small family farms.

And people have fled north, seeking economic opportunity.

A way to feed their children.

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In Jesus' time, the "most vulnerable"  
were widows and orphans,  
the people who lacked a social safety net  
in that strongly family-oriented culture.

Climate change is creating  
whole new categories of "most vulnerable:"  
people displaced, impoverished,  
separated from means of sustenance,  
from family and community  
by the disruptions of a changing climate.

People becoming the least of these.

Our response to them,  
to all of the "least of these,"  
is a central concern of today's Gospel lesson.

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Jesus is talking to the disciples,  
pointing to a future time  
when Christ, the Son of Man, will return,  
sit on the throne of his glory  
and judge “all the nations.”

Jesus tells them that people  
will be separated into two categories:  
those who inherit the kingdom,  
and those who are sent to the eternal fire.

Those who inherit the kingdom  
the sheep, in this metaphor,  
are those who showed mercy  
to all whom they met.

And who, in so doing,  
showed mercy to *Christ*.

“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.”

The merciful ask for clarification  
about that surprising *I* pronoun.

“Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry  
and gave you food,” they ask.

They can’t recall, after all,  
having encountered in their daily travels  
the Son of Man, this King of Kings,  
the one currently enthroned in his Glory.

And surely they would have noticed *him*.

The king reassures them that they heard him right.

“Truly I tell you,” the King says, in Jesus’ telling,  
“just as you did it to one of the least of these  
who are members of my family, so you did it to me.”

Christ, the Son of Man, we are to understand,  
doesn’t just care for the least of these from a safe and kingly distance.

He identifies himself so intimately with them  
that what we do to one of them, *we do to him*.

We find Christ, in other words,  
on the margins:  
with the persecuted,  
the oppressed  
the poor  
the most vulnerable.

Right there, amidst the least of these.

This story points to that most staggering truth:  
through Christ, God is with us  
in the messiness of human life:  
in the darkest, hardest,  
most desolate places.

Christ puts himself *there*.

Right there, in the thick of the worst of it.

That's good news.

And also, if we take it seriously,  
as we must, deeply challenging news.

—

Because while this is a story about future judgment,  
it is also and maybe mostly  
a story about how we live our lives  
here,  
now.

And that story is unambiguous.

To serve Jesus is to serve the least of these.

To serve the least of these is therefore  
more than a humanitarian impulse,  
more than a utilitarian act to get us into heaven -  
which is how the goats in this story  
seemed inclined to think about it.

It's the very essence of faith.

It's how we are to *be*.

We are to respond  
to those in need  
as we would  
to Jesus.

Maybe we should let that sink in for a moment.

We are to respond  
to those in need  
as we would  
to Jesus.

—

And that part of this story  
rings loudly here in this climate-changed world -

in this world where the stories  
of the people on Ile de Jean Charles, .  
on Alaska's coast, in Micronesia,  
or arriving, desperate, at our southern border  
are not isolated stories.

Where those stories a part  
of a bigger picture.

One that points to a systemic  
failure of mercy.

To see that picture,  
conjure up a map of the world in your head.

Put dark purple shading in central America,  
equatorial Africa, the east coast of South America,  
the sub-continent of India, and most of East Asia,  
especially the small island nations of Oceania.

Those are the areas where people  
are most vulnerable to climate change.

They're the places most exposed to its risks:  
excessive heat,  
flooding and drought,  
sea level rise,  
disruptions to food supply.

And they're also the places least able  
to afford to mitigate those risks.

So what you're visualizing is a map  
of the new "least of these," the people  
whose well-being is under threat  
*now, not in the future*, by climate change.

Under threat  
because of how we, Americans and Europeans,  
have been living our lives.

The carbon in the atmosphere  
that's changing the climate *now*  
belongs to us to our way of life.

Our way of life  
that now threatens  
the least of these.

"just as you did it to one of the least of these,  
you did it to me."

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One of the problems with climate change  
is that it's so big it's hard to grasp.

It's colors on a map,  
that easily become a piece of abstract art.

And it can feel distant,  
affecting people we've never met,  
people whose lives are far removed  
from our daily lives.

This text calls us to think differently  
about that map we're all imagining.

To draw it close to our hearts.

How do we feel about that map  
if we consider that the purple shading  
represents far-away face sin which we would see  
the face of *Jesus*?

How would we respond to *that* map?

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This text is clear about how we should respond.

With *mercy*.

But what does it mean  
to show mercy to the *world*?

That feels like a tall order.

But I think the text gives us a hint.

We need to be more like sheep.

Sheep, as Jesus would have understood them,  
have some qualities we could learn from.

Sheep get a bad rap these days:

to be a sheep is to be  
not especially bright,  
excessively obedient.

But in Jesus' day, sheep had  
a different vibe.

They were respected.  
Not just because they were valuable.  
But because of how they were together.

The collective noun for a group of sheep,  
a flock, is also a verb:  
to flock is to move or come together.

That's what sheep do.

They move and come *together*.

Theologian Catherine Keller writes that:

“In an ancient agricultural context, sheep had connotations not of penned-in, passive, and pretty obedience, but of a roving co-existence in the wilderness.”

A roving *co-existence* in the wilderness.

When they’re threatened, sheep don’t turn on each other or go their separate ways.

They stick together, forming a circle facing outwards.

They seek mutual protection.

—

What would it mean for us to live more like that?

How might that map of a climate-changed world start to look different if we thought about it with more sheep-like sensibilities?

Sensibilities that prompt us  
to see our neighbors, all of them,  
but especially the “least of these” among us,  
as members of our flock?

It would mean seeing the threat of climate change  
not as a far-away hazard confronting someone we don’t know,  
but as a threat to our mutual co-existence.

Which it is.

And our response to that threat,  
if we think like sheep,  
would be to come together,  
in order to care for the whole flock.

Especially the least of these.

Our response to that threat  
would be to work for the *common* good,  
not just our *own* good.

That means working for systemic change  
that rights the wrongs  
that make that map of vulnerability  
you imagined awhile back possible.

It means working for systemic change that creates  
civic, political, and economic structures that are merciful.

Not predatory.

That enact love, not cruelty.

—

Jesus knew, better than anyone,  
that none of us is purely sheep  
or purely goat, we're all both.

This text asks us  
to nurture our sheep-like tendencies.

For Jesus' sake.

And yes, we can choose to see what this text asks of us  
as sacrifice, giving up on that much-vaunted individualism  
that we've been told to prize.

But as we rove  
through *this* wilderness time,  
I wonder if maybe we're ready  
to embrace a different way.

Ready to come together,  
to nurture a roving *co*-existence  
in this wilderness time through which we walk.

Ready to move together, all of us  
on God's still-green earth, members of a *flock*.

A flock that cares for its own.  
Which is every last one of us.

*Epecially* the least of these.

The ones in whose faces  
we see the face of Jesus,  
whom we joyfully follow.

Amen.