

Andi Lloyd
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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.

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.

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."

—

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?

—

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.