Matthew 25:31–46; Ezekiel 34:11–16, 20–24

The Shepherd seeks us and sets things right

Friends, when Debbie and I brought our children to church, I thought I knew who we were bringing them for. **[Slide 2]**

I'd grown up in the church, and when our children came along, I wanted them to have the same foundation the church had given me. So Debbie and I took them. And somewhere along the way, the Holy Spirit began dealing with their father.

I can see it more clearly now than I could then. **I brought my children, and God called me.**

That memory came back to me this week as I read Ezekiel. He's speaking to people a long way from home, and I'd like you to listen for who takes the first step to bring them back.

[Read Ezekiel 34:11–16, 20–24 from the NIV.]

In Ezekiel, we see all the countries where the people have been scattered. Then we see the mountains of Israel, the ravines, the places where people live. By the time Ezekiel is through, we're close enough to see a sheep lie down. Think what that would mean to someone living in exile in Babylon. After all those years away, you could lie down again on ground you knew. And who came looking for you? The Shepherd himself.[1]

Now think about the sheep that came to the water second. **[Slide 3]** In the verses between the two portions we read, some of the flock drink their fill and stir up the mud with their feet. Now Get This… The sheep coming behind them have to drink what's left.[2]

That gives me pause. If I'd been near the front, I might have gone home and told everybody there was plenty of good water. I'd have told the truth about my own experience and missed what happened to my neighbor. You see what I mean; I got what I needed, but what about those behind me?

What moves me in Ezekiel is that the Shepherd knows what happened at the water. He tends the sheep that got hurt, and he steps in so it can come back and drink in peace.

Now carry that thirsty sheep with you into Matthew 25. Jesus gathers the nations before him, and we expect a King to speak about the great affairs of the world. Then he speaks about something as ordinary as giving somebody a drink. **[Slide 4]**

The King brings our allegiance into the light

[Read Matthew 25:31–46 from the NIV.]

[Slide 5]

Did you notice what the King says before he mentions a single meal or visit? He calls the people on his right blessed by his Father and invites them to receive their inheritance. Then

[1] Ezek. 1:1–3, 34:11–15.
[2] Ezek. 34:17–22.

comes that little word “for” in verse 35, “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat.” Jesus tells them why the meal mattered. When they fed someone who was hungry, he received it personally. We hear both truths here. Christ has secured the inheritance through his own self-giving, and the faith that receives him goes to work in love.[3]

Who are the people the King calls his brothers and sisters? Earlier in Matthew, Jesus sends his disciples out dependent on the hospitality of strangers. Someone has to open a door, make room at the table, draw the water. **Jesus tells the disciples that whoever welcomes them welcomes him.**[4] That gives us good reason to hear a particular concern for his vulnerable followers here. Elsewhere he commands us to love even our enemies. We already know how far his love reaches. **Here we learn how closely he identifies himself with those who depend on another person’s welcome.**

But here's the thing: both groups are surprised. Neither remembers a day when the King himself asked for a drink. Yet the people on his right had recognized thirst well enough to do something about it... What surprises them is how personally Jesus took the drink they gave. And I wonder if that helps us understand what we mean by holiness. When I surrender my life to Christ, I’m giving him access even to the part of me that decides whether I have time to pull up a chair. His Spirit can work there.

Squirrel: My son Austin and I have talked about how faith becomes faithful presence over time. We even worked out a formula for it. And you thought *I* was a geek. **[Slide 6]** Say somebody asks me for a meal. I know I care, but the person who asked is still hungry. My intention starts to mean something to them when the food is in their hands. And if I keep showing up, over time they learn something I could never establish just by telling them I care. **They know they can ask me again**. That, in a nutshell, is faithful presence…

What troubles me about the people on the King’s left is how easily I can understand their question. I can imagine myself doing almost anything Jesus asked, all the while arranging my days so very few people can ask anything of me. Jesus calls that **omission** to account. He speaks of eternal life and eternal punishment. There is still time for me to return a call, ask forgiveness, or hear what I missed.

Grace reaches the heart that hesitates

Hearing that judgment, I may wonder how many visits it would take to settle the question. Imagine taking that worry into a hospital room. While the person in the bed is trying to tell me what the doctor said, I’m already thinking, *What time is it? Where do I have to be next?* I made the visit. Did I hear what they came so close to telling me?

The Jesus who will judge is the Jesus who went to the cross for us and rose again. Paul tells Titus that Christ gave himself to redeem and purify a people who belong to him. He describes them as “eager to do what is good” (Titus 2:14 NIV).[5] As a holiness pastor, it’s that word

[3] Matt. 25:31–46. John Wesley, Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament, notes on Matt. 25:34–40.
[4] Matt. 10:40–42, 12:48–50, 25:40, 45.

eager that catches my attention. I can make the visit because it's my duty and still resent the interruption. Can Christ reach the part of me that wishes I were somewhere else?

Friends have long answered yes. Our Richmond Declaration speaks of justification, regeneration, and sanctification.[5] When I come to Christ in repentance and faith, he pardons my sin. He gives me new life, with desires I could never have worked up on my own. And as I keep walking with him, his Spirit can change what I want. I may find myself pulling up a chair because I really do want to hear how the night went.

And some days I want to make that visit, but I still hesitate outside the door. Something about that room brings back the last time I walked into one like it. Sometimes obedience comes with shaking hands. **[Slide 7]**

There are things from my military service that I wish I had never seen and memories I wish I did not carry. I have entrusted those things to Jesus. I still remember them. Christ has met me in what I carry. I want others to know they can ask for help. A patient listener, a dependable friend, someone equipped to help with what still hurts—all of them have a place among us. *And sometimes I discover my own need for care in the very place I've gone to offer it.*

CLOSING: LOVE BECOMES MUTUAL AND PARTICULAR

Last Sunday, I mentioned someone asking about my scuffed shoes. **[Slide 8]** I explained that they came from kneeling in prayer beside hospital beds. Getting down is easier than getting back up these days. Sometimes a patient sees me struggling and starts trying to help. There they are, recovering in bed, concerned about getting the pastor to his feet. I came to offer care, and they were ready to offer care to me.

Friends, maybe somebody has come to mind this morning. **[Slide 9]** As we settle into open worship, hold that person before the Lord. And if you're the one who's weary today, let the Shepherd care for you, too.

Our Query: Lord Jesus, whom have I lost sight of, and what would it mean to make room for them beside me? [Slide 10]

[5] Indiana Yearly Meeting, *Faith and Practice* (2018), "1887 Richmond Declaration of Faith," 24–26.

Opening Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank you for bringing us together this morning. You know what each of us carried through the door, and we're grateful we can bring it to you. As we sing and settle into the quiet, help us hear the voice of Jesus, our Shepherd. Open our eyes to the people beside us, and help us love them with the kindness you have shown us. In Jesus' name, amen.

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, search our hearts and receive our honest surrender. Cleanse what resists your love. Strengthen what is afraid, restore what is weary, and teach us to offer and receive your care. Make us faithful to the people you entrust to us. Amen.

THE READINGS AND MY NOTES:

In the first reading, we follow the Shepherd as he goes out to find a missing sheep. In the second, we learn what happened to some of the sheep he went looking for. **Some of the sheep the Shepherd goes to find were shouldered out by the flock**. *That changes what it means to bring them home*.

Cyndi Parker gives us a way into that discovery. When she teaches Psalm 23, she asks us to notice the pasture… An Indiana congregation might picture a green field running from the barn to the fence line. Parker invites us onto open ground where the shepherd has to know the country. Even within the Judean hills, the western slopes receive more rain than the eastern slopes.[6] Now listen to the places Ezekiel names as the Shepherd brings his people home—mountains, ravines, settlements, grazing ground. Then watch what happens when the flock reaches the water.

Ezekiel 34:11-16, **11** "'For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. **12** As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. **13** I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. **14** I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. **15** I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign Lord. **16** I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice.

Ezekiel 34:20-24, **20** "'Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says to them: See, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. **21** Because you shove with flank and shoulder, butting all the weak sheep with your horns until you have driven them away, **22** I will save my flock, and they will no longer be plundered. I will judge between one sheep and another. **23** I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. **24** I the Lord will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the Lord have spoken.

Six golden nuggets…

1. **Before God tells the sheep what will happen, he tells them who is coming** *(Ezek. 34:11–12).* Earlier in the chapter, Israel's shepherds fed themselves while the sick went untended and the scattered went unsearched for (Ezek. 34:2–6). The people have good reason to wonder who will take responsibility for them now. Into that history comes the promise, "I myself will search for my sheep and look after them" (Ezekiel 34:11, NIV). There is Gospel in the order of those words. **Before a single sheep takes a step toward home, God has already claimed it as his own.**

2. **To people in exile, home is a place they could describe** *(Ezek. 34:13–15).* Watch how the view narrows. First we see the nations where the people have been scattered. Then Israel comes into view. Then we see its mountains and ravines. Finally, we are close enough to see a sheep lie down. That last detail is worth lingering over. A displaced person could hear in this promise the hope of an ordinary evening on familiar ground. **God's promise is large enough to gather a people from the nations and tender enough to give one weary creature a place to rest.**

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[6] Cyndi Parker, Listen to the Land: Historical Geography, Student's Guide (BiblicalTraining.org, 2021), 3–4, 57, 59.

3. **Follow the sheep that comes to drink second** *(Ezek. 34:17–19).* These intervening verses belong in the sermon, even if they are left out of the public reading. The first sheep gets clear water. By the time the next one arrives, hooves have churned it to mud. Both sheep have come to the same water. Only one has had a good drink. Here is where the land helps us hear the moral force of the passage. **If you want to know how the flock is doing, look at what is left for the one who comes behind.** That gives holiness a searchingly ordinary measure. What does my neighbor find after I have taken my share?

4. **A missing sheep may have a story the flock would rather forget** *(Ezek. 34:16, 20–22).* In verse 16 we hear about strays. By verse 21 the Lord makes us look at shoulders and horns. A sheep can disappear from view after a succession of shoves, each one easier for the flock to overlook than for the weaker animal to endure. There is a pastoral lesson here for Friends. When someone slips away from the meeting, we may sincerely miss them and still misunderstand why they left. **Love makes the visit. Humility gives the person time to tell us what happened.**

5. **The hand that binds the wound also stops the horn** *(Ezek. 34:16, 20–22).* Verse 16 can catch a reader off guard. In one breath God speaks of strengthening the weak and destroying the sleek and strong. Verse 21 tells us what has aroused his judgment. The strong have used their advantage to drive others away. Imagine binding an injured sheep, leading it back to water, and leaving it to face the very horns that wounded it. The Shepherd sees the work of mercy through. **For the bruised sheep, the Shepherd's judgment means it can come back to drink in peace.**

6. **The Shepherd-King carries David's name and a servant's calling** *(Ezek. 34:23–24).* David once tended his father's sheep near Bethlehem, a town Parker places at the edge of the wilderness.[7] When Ezekiel invokes David's name generations later, Israel hears a promise about the future of its kingship. Notice the title God gives the promised ruler—*my servant*. His royal assignment is to feed the flock. Christian readers hear that promise carried forward when Jesus calls himself the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep (John 10:11). And when Jesus pictures the Son of Man coming in glory, the King speaks of hunger, thirst, sickness, and a prison visit (Matt. 25:31–40). By then, Ezekiel has taught us why those details belong in a passage about a king.

In this second reading, if I look at this passage through the Flow of Holiness lens, what has Christ's grace made available to me? The detail that opens the passage for me is that **both groups are surprised**. Neither remembers an occasion when the King himself asked for a drink. Yet somebody got up and drew the water. Somebody else went on with the day. At the judgment, Jesus tells them what that moment meant to him.

GRACE COMES FIRST, AND MERCY MATTERS…

Matthew 25:31-46, The Sheep and the Goats: **31** "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. **32** All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. **33** He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

34 "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. **35** For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, **36** I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

[7] Parker, Listen to the Land, 57, 59. See also 1 Sam. 16:1, 11–13.

37 "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? **38** When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? **39** When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

40 "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

41 "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. **42** For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, **43** I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'

44 "They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'

45 "He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'

46 "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

In this passage, notice the order of the King's words. Before he names a single act of mercy, he calls those on his right blessed by his Father and invites them to receive an inheritance prepared for them since creation. Then comes the little word *for* in verse 35. Jesus gives their feeding, welcoming, clothing, and visiting real weight in his verdict. An inheritance is a gift, and the King takes seriously how its heirs have lived. John Wesley reads those verses together. Christ has secured the kingdom through his self-giving, and the faith that receives him becomes active in love.[8]

That is where our Friends doctrine of holiness helps. The Richmond Declaration, as received by Indiana Yearly Meeting, says that in justification God pardons us by grace. In regeneration, he gives us new desires. In sanctification, the Spirit cleanses the heart and enables us to love God wholeheartedly.[9] Think what that means at a hospital door. I can make a visit because it is my duty and still resent the interruption. I can also bring that resentment honestly to Christ. The promise of holiness is that he can reach the part of me that wishes I were somewhere else. In time, I may find myself pulling up a chair because I want to hear how the night went. The person in the bed experiences the difference.

The surprise tells us something about faithful presence…

The righteous ask when they saw him. What they failed to recognize was **the King**. They had recognized the hunger well enough to feed somebody. That matters for your book, Paul. In the movement you and Austin have been tracing, the thirsty person interrupts the day. Attention allows me to hear the request. Intention becomes obedience when I get the water into somebody's hands. Over time, as I keep yielding my day to Christ, another person may come to know me as someone they can ask. **That is faithful presence from the thirsty person's side.**

Jesus gives that presence a particular focus. He calls the people in question his brothers and sisters. Earlier in Matthew, he sends disciples out dependent on hospitality and identifies the welcome they receive with a welcome given to him (Matt. 10:40–42). That gives us reason to hear his vulnerable followers especially in this passage. His command to love our enemies gives that same love a wider reach (Matt. 5:43–48). And here your bedside story makes a contribution I would keep: the person in the bed may be the disciple through whom Christ extends care **to you**. Sometimes the next act of surrender is letting somebody give you a hand.

The warning reaches the life we leave unexamined…

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[8] John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*, notes on Matthew 25:34–40.
[9] Indiana Yearly Meeting, *Faith and Practice* (2018), "1887 Richmond Declaration of Faith," 24–26.

Those on the King's left can ask quite sincerely when they ever saw him in need. It is possible to imagine that we would do anything Jesus asked while arranging our days so that very few people can ask anything of us. Jesus names what went undone, and verse 46 gives his judgment eternal consequence. That gives your phrase *the first yes must become a walked yes* its urgency. A missed visit can be confessed. A neglected friendship can be tended. The danger is growing comfortable with a profession of love that the people within our reach seldom experience.

For Sunday: Friends, what strikes me is that the people on the King's right are surprised. They remember a thirsty person. What surprises them is how personally Jesus took the drink they gave. And I wonder if that helps us understand what we mean by holiness. When I surrender my life to Christ, I'm giving him access even to the part of me that decides whether I have time to pull up a chair. His Spirit can work there. He can forgive me for the visit I've put off, and he can change what I want when I walk through that door.