

*Based on Matthew 25:41-46 and "The Powwow at the End of the World" by Sherman Alexie, Spokane*

It is hard for us, I know, to hear such words of judgment from Jesus. He is supposed to be loving and kind, we say here at SPC, full of grace and mercy - which he is! - not cursing us to eternal punishment in a pit of fire.

And yet, here it is, right here in Matthew 25, for those of us who have not yet figured out God cares far more about what we *do* - or in this case what we do *not* do - than what we claim to believe or disbelieve. If we want to live in a world that is just, Matthew 25 insists, we have to practice living justly.

As uncomfortable as it is for us, living justly requires, at some level, judgment. A sense that something is wrong - like the displacement of the Spokane and the decimation of the land in our Reading by Sherman Alexie - mixed with a vision of repair by a salmon swimming upstream with three stories in its soul and a dance of forgiveness once the wrong has been made right.

This prayer for repair, this work of living justly, this nudge toward redemption is what Jesus is getting at in Matthew 25. He is blending the same kind of uncomfortable angst mixed with fearless imagination the poet does in our Reading. He is telling the truth about the harm we inflict from a spirit of love and grace that calls us to our better selves. He is, after all, teaching *the church* how to *be* the church on the other side of the cross, which is just around the corner in the story. His vision is meant to be *instructive* not punitive. A warning, not a decision that has already been made.

We should note, as well, this is a *communal* warning, not an individual one. In the biblical version of "The Powwow at the End of the World," it is *the nations* that gather for entry into the Kingdom of God, not. It is *the nations* who are deemed insufficiently practiced in the way of that Kingdom in this parable, not individuals. Jesus is instructing a community on what it takes to build an entire society infused with justice and joy, for everyone born, a place at the table. That is the point of the parable.

Even the language of punishment in the Greek requires some analysis, referring more to a concept of remediation than condemnation. If you have not yet been living justly, Jesus is trying to say, there is simply no way you can enter the fullness of the reign of God. Not because you are bad but because you simply do not know how. You lack practice. You have to go back to preschool and re-learn your ABCs.

This is why the national church has promoted dismantling structural racism as a core component of the Matthew 25 Initiative. We know we need to, as a denomination, go back to preschool and re-learn our ABCs when it comes to racism. We need to tell the truth about the harm we have done - both intentionally and unintentionally. We need to stop doing that harm, and to start building the kinds of communities that can enter the reign of God in all ways because we have been practicing it in small ways.

The SPC History project is one small way we are already engaging in the work of dismantling structural racism. Plans are underway to present the findings of the History Project in worship and adult education through the Season of Lent. Some of our findings will be hard to hear. Others may just not make sense. Others may need to

be placed in a broader cultural context. All of it will be essential toward learning how to live more faithfully in the reign of God Jesus came to proclaim.

Like the parable, the work of dismantling structural racism can feel judgmental, toward ourselves and toward our forbears, which is a challenge for a church that cares so much about lovingkindness, grace, and mercy. It can feel awkward, uncomfortable, and even upsetting for the people of color in our congregation navigating their own identity in the midst of a predominantly white church trying to figure itself out. We will make mistakes in the moment - and already have! - and need to repair recent harm as much as we strive to repair historical harm.

The good news is that we are trying, which is all Jesus is really asking in this the final parable of his life. Just don't get complacent, he is saying. Just do your part and let God handle the rest.

Our part is clear here at SPC: to be and become people of radical compassion, working for justice and wholeness in ourselves and in the world. If we really do this, day in day out, dismantling, stone by stone, the systems of oppression that divide and subjugate our siblings and building living stone by living stone, a society marked by justice and love, perhaps we will become sufficiently refined as a people and a nation that when The Son of Man joins the salmon at The Powwow at the End of the World, we, too, can pray and laugh and dance in the healing grace of forgiveness.