

The King Is Coming

Matthew 25:31-46

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When Jesus comes back in all his glory...and notice, it is when, not if, he is going to be seated on his glorious throne, and then he's going to start sorting people. The good news for us is that when Jesus starts sorting people, he sets the bar really low. And by really low, I mean really low. But it turns out, that is the bad news as well. Some people find the bar is set so low, they missed it. Here is where Jesus sets the bar. And it is low. If you did things for those who are considered the least, then you made it. If you bowed down low enough to be with the least, you made it. Which means if you couldn't bow down, or wouldn't bow down to be with the least, you missed. And you missed out.

Lowering the bar is a real surprise. We are more accustomed to raising the bar, and giving special recognition to those who can raise their game to match the raised bar. We are more accustomed to the sorting process that King David did at the end of his reign. When King David sorted his kingdom, he called out for special acclaim the mighty warriors.

- Josheb-basshebeth, he was chief of the Three; he raised his spear against eight hundred men, whom he killed in one encounter.
- Next to him was Eleazar. As one of the three mighty warriors, he was with David when the Israelites retreated from the Philistines. But Eleazar stood his ground and struck down the Philistines till his hand grew tired and froze to the sword.
- Next to him was Shammah. Shammah stood his ground against the Philistines and defended a field full of lentils.
- Abishai raised his spear against three hundred men, Benaiah struck down Moab's two mightiest warriors. He also went down into a pit on a snowy day and killed a lion. He also struck down a huge Egyptian.

This sorting goes on and on, but you get the picture. These mighty warriors raised the bar and fought valiant fights, establishing their greatness through their exploits. That's how they got sorted out to the top, to the special place of honor.

How different things are with Jesus. He sorts people out, and those he lavishes praise and honor and recognition and entrance into his kingdom, are those who lowered themselves under the bar to serve others. They fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, welcomed the strangers and invited them in, clothed the ones who needed clothes, and visited the sick and the hospitals and the ones who were prisoners. One thing that catches our attention in this story is that both those who did the things Jesus was looking for and those who didn't do the things Jesus was looking for are surprised. The righteous say, "When did we see you as the least and help you?" The ones who are not

righteous say, “When did we see you as the least and not help you?” They are equally surprised that Jesus claims he was present when they did, or did not do these things to the least of these.

That anyone who knows Jesus would be surprised is surprising. His presence, and preference for the least was evident in so many ways. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the meek, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...blessed are those who are persecuted.” He said, “Come unto me all who are weary and heavy laden.” He stepped right into the world of the leper and the lame and the sinners and tax collectors. He touched. He welcomed. He sat at table. He defended. When James and John played by the old rules and asked if they could sit on thrones of special honor in the kingdom of heaven, Jesus told all of the disciples how things were in his kingdom. “Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be the slave.” Just to make sure they understood it was his kingdom he was talking about, he said, “For the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” That part about giving his life as a ransom. He talked about how he was going to the cross to lay down his life for others.

That anyone who knows Jesus would be surprised at him saying he has a special place among the least is surprising. He made it so clear in what he did and what he said. Nevertheless, the fact that it is surprising isn't all that surprising. The ways of power are ingrained in our societies and in our relationships and in our understanding of success and achievement and worth. We live in a world that raises the bar. It continues to surprise us that Jesus, in his kingdom, lowers the bar. And then he calls us to come down below the bar, down where the least live. If we will just come down there, we will find he is already there. When you did it unto the least of these, you did it unto me. That's what Jesus said.

That it is Jesus who says these words is what gives this passage such urgency and importance. When he says that he is present with the least of these, that he is bound to the least of these, he is still with his disciples. He is still teaching. He is still alive. But when he comes again to make his sorting, dividing the sheep from the goats, the righteous from the unrighteous, the ones who did these things to the least of these and the ones who did not do these things to the least of these, he will have endured his own trial. He will have endured his own suffering. He will have endured his own rejection. He will have endured his own humiliation. He will know in ways we cannot imagine what it truly means to be the least one. His life will be deemed of no value as he is accused, tried, convicted, and condemned. He will be judged to be the least of these as he is hung on the cross to die.

When he returns in his glory, and his return will be glorious, he will return as the one who was crucified, dead, and buried. But that is not all. He will return as the one who has risen from the dead, triumphant over sin, over evil, over the evil one, and triumphant over suffering and death. You might think after all Jesus has been through, when he returns he would say, “I’m done with that.” I suffered and died once. I was the least. Now it’s time to sit on my throne. And maybe by then, maybe on that glorious day, he will be done with all this being the least. More likely on that day he will have lifted up all the least and crowned them with glory and honor. But until then, this Jesus who suffered and died has not stopped being present with the ones who are the least.

This story is not just about the importance of helping other people. That is certainly a part of the gospel, being concerned for the whole person, and particularly for those in need. But this story proclaims something that truly is extraordinary. The King of kings and the Lord of lords has humbled himself. He has made his home with the least. As the King of kings he has literally turned the kingdom upside down. The least are the greatest. Those who want to be the greatest must learn to be the servant of others, indeed, the servant of all. And as we learn to be servants, in a mysterious and beautiful awakening we will be meeting Jesus, getting to know Jesus, in a deep and profound way. Our lives will get turned upside down, and when all is said and done we will realize he turned us right side up.

With the advent of I-phones it has become commonplace for people to stop and take pictures wherever and whenever the mood strikes. Your camera is always with you. This has also led to another phenomenon known as photo-bombing. When a picture is being taken, someone sneaks into the picture at just the right moment, unannounced, and they “photo-bomb” the picture. Now I don’t want to be boastful, but I think I might have invented photo-bombing. In the days before I-phones had appeared on the scene, Julie was in charge of a big fundraising walk. It was the AIDS walk for Houston, Texas, and thousands of people gathered to walk in support of those whose lives were affected by AIDS. Because she was in charge of this big event, the television crews were interviewing her. I was in a playful mood that morning, so while she was on camera being interviewed. I walked behind her and photo-bombed her interview. But I wasn’t content simply to walk behind her. I pretended I was walking down steps and then back up. Eventually both the cameraman and Julie realized what was going on. The person interviewing her asked, “Do you know that man?” Julie said, “That’s my junior high husband.”

Needless to say, I not only like photo-bombing, I love photo-bombing. I wonder if in his own way Jesus isn’t inviting us to learn how to photo-bomb. When we read the gospel stories, he wants them to be more than stories. He wants them to be more than events that happened one time. When he is approached by a leper who says, “If you are willing you can make me clean,” and when he says, “I am willing,” and when he reaches out to touch the hand of the leper...I can just imagine him pausing for a moment

and signaling to us, “Come here, get in the picture.” When the man who is lame is being carried by his friends and lowered through the ceiling into the house where Jesus was staying, as this man and his friends are bowed down at the feet of Jesus, he pauses and says, “Come here, get in the picture.” When he goes to the home of the tax-collector Levi and participates in the big party, when he tells Zacchaeus he’s coming to his home, when a woman whose life was marked by sin washes his feet with her tears and dries those tears with her own hair, when he comes to the tomb of Lazarus and sheds his own tears of sorrow at the death of a friend, he doesn’t want us on the sidelines. He doesn’t want us watching someone else’s story unfold. He doesn’t want us as passive observers. Each and every encounter in his life he is lowering the bar. He is showing us what it means to care for the least. He is demonstrating what it looks like to be a servant. He is signaling for us, “Get in this picture.” Get in this picture and learn from me what it means to pour your heart out to the ones who are the least.

It makes me wonder if that is just the half of it. I wonder if when we find ourselves in places where we give, in places where we serve, if there isn’t someone else who photo-bombs the picture. Alyce McKenzie writes about a story that appeared in *Guideposts* magazine in 1981 about a young mother who received word that her brother and his wife, her sister, and both the sister’s children had been killed in a car wreck. She goes on to tell how she was numbed by the news and having difficulty accomplishing the necessary tasks to prepare for their flight back to Missouri to be with her family. At that point, a friend stopped by and simply said he was there to polish their shoes. In response to her surprised look he recounted how during a family tragedy it had taken him over an hour to polish all the family’s shoes. Watching this friend sitting on the kitchen floor polishing all their shoes reminded her of someone else sitting on the floor washing people’s feet, a simple act of presence and service. “Now, whenever I hear of an acquaintance who has lost a loved one...I try to think of one specific task that suits that person’s need—such as washing the family car, taking the dogs to the boarding kennel, or housesitting during the funeral. And if the person says to me, ‘How did you know I needed that done?’ I reply ‘It’s because a man once cleaned my shoes.’”¹

As this grieving woman watched a friend polishing all of her family’s shoes, she thought of someone else sitting on the floor washing people’s feet. In a sweet and subtle way, this woman is saying that as she watched her friend polishing her family’s shoes, she thought of Jesus, taking off his outer robe and wrapping a towel around his waist. She thought of Jesus lowering the bar. She thought of Jesus kneeling down and one by one washing the feet of his disciples. That wasn’t his job. That was a job that belonged to a servant. That wasn’t a job for Jesus. But we have come to realize, Jesus was not a servant. He was a king. And what a king he was. He turned the world upside down, and he washed the feet of his disciples. This woman watched a friend polishing her family’s shoes and she realized Jesus had photo-bombed the picture. He was there with them. Whenever you do it the least of these, you did it unto me.

¹ Alyce McKenzie, *Preaching Biblical Wisdom in a Self-Help Society*, 138, 139.

Has Jesus ever photo-bombed a moment in your life? One of the sweetest moments for me is captured in a photo. On one of our medical trips to Guatemala we met a young girl diagnosed with a spinal condition that was affecting her ability to walk. She began to have signs of this disease as an eight year old, and now at just eleven years of age she could no longer walk. Sadly, our medical team could not heal her. The best we could do was to give her a walker. This beautiful little girl gamely made her way around the clinic with her walker. She was smiling. While we were in this clinic one of our dentists pulled me aside. In the days leading up to the trip she had been telling some of her friends about the mission project she was doing. In response someone gave her a Spanish language Bible and said, “Find the right person and give them this Bible.”

Because our dentist friend, Dr. Tina, was in clinic all day, she handed me the Bible and said, “Find just the right person.” Watching the little girl with her walker, facing a lifetime of challenges, and smiling through it all, I knew who the right person was. I went in the dental clinic, waited for Tina to extract yet another tooth, and then told her to come with me. We found the little girl, whose name was Evelyn. We told her we had been sent with a special gift for a very special person, and that we felt like she was the person we should give the gift to. Tina took the Bible, placed it in the small hands of Evelyn, and we prayed for her. Our team was not able to heal Evelyn. But something felt right about giving her a story about Jesus, the King who lowers the bar so much that he promises to be present with people in every sadness and struggle they endure. Sometimes when I look at that picture my eyes play a trick on me. If I turn the page to just the right angle, it’s almost as if Jesus appears in the picture, just as if he was photo-bombing us and with a gentle smile saying, “When you did it unto the least of these, you did it unto me.”

Today is Christ the King Sunday. We worship King Jesus, who has turned this world upside down. He has lowered the bar and said come here, kneel down, and you’ll be situated just right for me and my kingdom.

One of my favourite Christian speakers and authors is named Tony Campolo. Without ever putting it in these specific terms, he shares a story where the bar is lowered and he meets someone who would be considered one of the least of these. When you hear this story I wouldn’t be surprised if what happens surprises you. But if you find yourself surprised at what happens, remember who Jesus was and who he spent his time with.

Anyway, Tony Campolo tells of sitting in a coffee shop in Honolulu at 3:30 in the morning. Some hookers came in and as they talked, he overheard one say her birthday was the next day. One of her companions said, “What do you want from me, a birthday cake? A birthday party? What do you want me to do, sing Happy Birthday?” The woman said, “Don’t be mean. I was just saying it is my birthday tomorrow. I’ve never had a party. Why should I expect one now?”

Tony listened and when they left, he went up to the man working the counter. He asked if the women came every night. He said yes, and that the one whose birthday was coming up was named Agnes. Tony said to the man, "I want to have a party for her tomorrow night. I'll come in at 2:30 and set up with a cake and decorations." The man got excited and agreed to help.

When Agnes came in the next day at 3:30 am, she was greeted by a banner wishing her happy birthday, a room full of decorations, and a birthday cake. Everyone sang to her. Then Harry, the man who worked the counter, told Agnes to blow out the candles. But she wouldn't blow out the candles. So he did. Then he gave her a knife to cut the cake, but she wouldn't cut the cake. She said, "Look, Harry, is it all right with you if I...I mean is it O.K. if I kind of...what I want to ask you is...is it O.K. if I keep the cake a little while? I mean is it all right if I don't eat it right away?"

She had never had a cake before. She took the cake and walked out with it. Tony says she held it like it was the Holy Grail. As she left, the room was silent. Tony says he didn't know what else to say, so he blurted out, "What do you say we pray?"

When he finished the prayer, Harry leaned over and said, "What kind of a church do you belong to?" Tony replied, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for hookers at 3:30 in the morning."²

Well, the bar doesn't get much lower than that. But I hope we never stop trying. I hope we never stop trying to lower the bar, stop trying to give ourselves more and more to this incredible King who has turned the world upside down. I wish I could see a picture of Tony Campolo and Agnes the hooker and Harry the bartender. I wish I could see Agnes holding that cake like it is the Holy Grail. I wish I could see the smiles on their faces. And I bet if you looked real close, you would see something that shouldn't surprise us at all. I bet we could see Jesus, photo-bombing that picture. After all, he is the one who said, "When you did it to the least of these, you did it unto me."

² Tony Campolo, *The Kingdom of God is a Party*.