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Who Among Us Will Shake Their Fist at the Gods?

The scripture for this morning is Matthew 25:31-46.

For a person like me who generally looks for the open optimism in all circumstances, that is a challenging passage. It is also for me the most foundational passage in how one lives a life in community, in righteousness and in faith to something greater than themselves. Preaching—like politics—is in part is the impossible task of trying to find a way to speak to a number of unique people, who come forth with unique needs, desires, and perspectives. So—one of the things that I hope that we can do as a people, whether it's our religion, our politics or entertainment, be willing to dwell in both the pleasure and the pain of reality and to walk with those who are not able to walk through the painful times alone and who do not want to walk in the joyful times by themselves.

Recently, my family decided to watch an animated Disney movie. I love animated Disney movies because, unlike much modern entertainment for children, Disney movies are still willing to provide the reality of pain in life. I learned about death from Bambi. Last night, my daughter learned about death from Moana. I did not expect her to respond in the way that she did to the moment when the grandmother character is lying in bed, breathing her last breaths. But sitting on my lap, I felt a different energy from my 3-year-old daughter. And I looked down at her, and she looked up at me with tears running from her eyes, and she said, "What's happening to her Grandma?" I had looked at the innocence of my child. "What's happening to her Grandma?" Now my family began to discuss, should we stop this movie? Of course, the 3-year-old is listening. But we are frantic: what do we do in this moment where pain has been entered into around which we thought we were going to be bringing joy. What do we do? Do we stop the movie? Do we try to explain—how do we manage the reality of reality?

Now, at this point it was important for me that she sees the conclusion of the story. Because death is not just part of this abstract, it is a part of the whole narrative. And if she cannot encounter death, how will she encounter poverty, loneliness, mental health, challenges that our society too often hides from itself. Politics like preaching is the art of striving to better do the impossible for those who have no possibility to be able to change the circumstances for themselves. Unfortunately, too often, this is not the way in which we engage in preaching or in politics. Too often, our world is too comfortable, staying in its complacent places of privilege and of self-satisfaction. We pat ourselves on the back for insignificant successes and we all too rarely criticize ourselves for monumental failures. My world is different now because I'm the parent who is able and has to determine whether or not those encounters of pain and movies will be watched. When I look back on my own life and I see that I encountered evil in Cruella Deville with the decision to watch 101 Dalmatians. That was a decision made for me. Now I no longer have those protective wings surrounding me. But I must choose when and how to be the protective wings for my child, for my neighbors, for those in my community I wanted to carry. Up until we watched the movie, I had been a parent who had been willing to allow my child to jump off a slightly-too-high height, to climb a slightly-too-ambitious jungle

gym, because I knew it would just be a bump or a scrape. But how do we deal with things that are more significant, and motions the underpinnings of who a person will be? Is it too early to know the pains of life from compassion, instead of driving her towards it?

So will she change? Will her carefree spirit diminish? Or perhaps, more importantly, will I change? Will the responsibility, the ability to shape someone's life or opportunities, whether that as a parent or as the preacher or as a parishioner—will I change, will I choose not to visit, will I choose not to clothe, because of the inconvenience it brings me now? I didn't think that that scene in that movie would impact her soul so much, and now I'm no longer sure I know what's best for her and anticipate the results.

The world is a big place, full of scary characters and unknown risks. Growing up in the Mennonite Church, I always felt this split between two very different thoughts of how to live in the world. In many ways, my own parents represented each one. The first thought goes something like this: The world is a place full of evil things, and included in that is this thing called sin. And you need to avoid temptations brought by other human beings. So you must be vigilant and you must be aware to avoid these trappings. In order to be aware, you already have to be exposed. Well, this is a paradox, and this paradox is solved by making sure that you remain as pure and away from those who would be impure, as possible. You must protect yourself from becoming a sinner by avoiding interacting with sinners. It is best to have only Christian friends. It is best to find a job that is a company owned by a Christian individual. Only marry a Christian, only interact socially with people like you. And this isn't just Christian or Mennonite-specific; it is a thought practice that happens to Catholics and evangelicals, and surely those outside of the Christian faith.

The second school of thought goes something like this: The world is a place full of sinful things, and included in that is this thing called evil, which is the whole corrupting atmosphere, not just the people within it. And in order to be a good Christian, it is then our job to expose evil in the systems and in the atmosphere, so that people can know how to pick a life away from sinful things, while surrounded by sinful systems. To act according to their own righteousness. In order to do this, it is important that we share in the consistency of our daily living. It is not a mission field to beat one's heads over in order to convert them, or to coerce them. It is simply to ask every day as I live my life, "Is my mission and the way that I live one of God or one to be an evil acolyte for the benefit of a few?"

When I read Matthew 25, I feel a strong pulling towards that second school of thought. That it is my role to interact with all and to be consistent in my own self. You see, I don't think evil and sin are really the point at all in this story. I know the bible story here is about the sheep and the goats and the separating, and who inherits the kingdom, but I don't think the point is about sin. In many ways, I think the focus on sin, the focus on eschatology and where I'll go when I die is the greatest barrier towards any positive afterlife that may exist. We consume ourselves so much with what will happen to me that we miss what is happening to us. We are so afraid of mistakes that we become afraid of the point in living. Matthew 25 is a story not of me—it's not even the story of we—it's a story of us. Whereas me is myself and we is a group of others like me, us includes those I

would rather not include. Us is all of the sheep and all of the goats, and I cannot help but think that in that story, there's a really big problem. Who didn't visit those who chose not to visit, to clothe the naked? We must go further than even we are called to. We must be more than we are asked of, because our systems are much bigger than we believe them to be.

I saw a headline—I was scrolling through Facebook the other day—I didn't actually click on it, but the headline was compelling. It said, that in order for the church to replace the amount of government assistance, each church in America would have to raise over \$700,000 more annually than it presently does. It is an impossible task that we are tasked to do. It is not only the success of a mission that we are called towards, it is the existence of the mission itself. To me the point is that the lift that we bring has to be more than just our life in and as the church. The lift has to be amongst us for us. Not just for me—not just for going over there to help them, wherever there is, and whoever they are.

When I started telling my friends and family that I was going to run for mayor, many found it made sense with who I was and who I had always been. But others asked me why I wanted to do this thing. Politics is evil, some told me. Politics is dirty, others insisted. My mother said, "Politicians are liars. Why can't you just be a pastor and help people that way through your faith." I responded, "It's not in my job description." And I don't mean to shatter your image here, but I've been a pastor, and some of them are liars too. And similarly, it's not in the job description. "Kevin—you know that's not what I mean; it's just that politicians lie to get elected." I responded, "Then I'll lose." She asked why would you put in all of that time and energy, just to lose? I said, "Because I don't think I'll lose. Because if I do, maybe it will do something to show there's a different way to be in politics." "And Mom—there are 60,000 people in my community who live in poverty! And it won't be talked about if I don't run. Because there's 60,000 people in my community who live in poverty, and they aren't sure how long they'll have a roof over their head, and they don't know where to get their kids new clothes for school, and they don't know if they'll have food on their table. Mom, they're not priorities in this system. And there are 16,000 people who need visited, who need the opportunity to feed themselves, to clothe themselves, and to visit one another." "I just think you should be a pastor," she said. "Mom, I will gladly drop out of this race and apply to the first lead pastor job you see with a church of 60,000 people, 16,000 of which live in poverty, and I get to dictate the budget in a way that changes those circumstances.

Now, I lost. And the *Washington Post* still hasn't called me for an interview to ask how I changed politics. And there are still good people running for office in this city who care, and who want to make change. And I don't know if I'll have influenced how they'll run in November or ever again, but I believe those who I worked with and supported me have made an impact, have no longer left hidden things that would prefer to be left hidden. The questions have been asked. If I ran for office because I felt that it was the right way to walk in my faith, and I did, then I can have no regrets. Was it the most effective use of my time? I'll never know. But I found a way to encourage myself and others to clothe the naked, to feed the hungry, to visit those who are in prison. And I don't know what impact I made or didn't make, but I know that I walked into the home of a family of 5, a family who lived in that home for a number of years, and on the first floor the only furniture

they have is a TV and a dining room table, and they thanked me for running. They said they weren't normally voters, but that they were going to vote for me because they had never heard themselves being talked about in politics before. I don't know what impact there was or will be. I know that that family alone made it worth it. That family invited me into their home for longer than the 30 second political knock on the door I was supposed to do. And maybe conversations like that are part of why I didn't win. But for a moment, I got to visit someone in their space where they were stripped naked of any impressions they could give to a community of their wellness, a place where their struggle lay bare. They saw themselves, and I hope they saw someone seeing their selves as a person of value and worth, someone for whom God would love, someone for whom God would move them to the correct side. I don't know if their neighbors voted; I don't know if the fact that they live in a community with less resources, where voters are less rich, was the smartest place for me to be as a politician, but I am also always a pastor, and I am also always a parishioner, and that was exactly where I was supposed to be for those people, my highest priorities.

This sermon has felt a little bit too much centered on me, and I don't want it to seem like I'm trying to say I'm sort of a hero or that I have anything better or that I am more capable than anyone else. In fact, quite the opposite. I didn't choose to talk about my faith while I ran for office. I didn't want to be a politician who tried to use their faith as some sort of card to gain votes. But the reality is that our faith or non-faith is our personal philosophy, and it is always how we will engage in the world. We cannot divorce ourselves from who we are and who we believe ourselves to be. Everywhere we go, we carry the mantles of our selves with us, and authenticity means not having to scream it the loudest from the highest tower. It is not, and never has been, my intention to convert people through coercion or through browbeating. I have no interest in instituting my theological principles through any power that I have, but I do desperately want to impact the world that I live in in a way that insures that more people have more access to find in my mind, in another way, as the kingdom of God. But I also am cognizant that I have lived my whole life in the United States, and although I've had the great luxury to travel to over a dozen nations, and many so-called developing countries, I have lived my whole life in a country where I'm aware that the clothes that I buy and wear are mostly made in sweatshops. The electronics that I have to make my life easier and more entertaining are mined in conflict zones primarily in the country that borders the country where my mother and my older brother were born. The food that I eat and the medicine that I receive are created and distributed in ways to maximize profits for shareholders, in ways that then directly ensure that some people starve, and some people die when they need it. The Gods of Money—their angels of profit drive our world and politics, and the Gods of War use our resources to kill children they call senior terrorists the moment they finished killing their parents with our bombs. And realistically, I won't be able to do a damn thing about it. But I will try. For us. I will try. Whether it is feeding, or clothing, or visiting, even if it is just amongst one another, because we go nowhere alone in this world, but too many people think that they do. And so we must pick up a mantle of a war against wars, one that wins not by being overpowering, but by being more clear. And so I look to you each and I ask what will you sacrifice, where will you go, how will you change, will it be you the last person standing at the shore line, raving like a mad person at the coming

winds of the storm? Who among us will shake their fist at the Gods and say, “No more! That is enough.” Amen.