

# Matthew 25:33-45

First Parish Church / 15 September 2019

I) **"Where Love Is, God Is"** by Leo Tolstoy (1885)

## Martin the Cobbler

a 1976 claymation special.  
Narrated by Alexandra Tolstoy.

"Where Love Is, God Is" is a short story about a shoemaker named Martin. The story begins with a background on Martin's life. He was a fine cobbler as he did his work well and never promised to do something that he could not do. He stayed busy with his work in his basement that had only one window. Through this window he could see only the feet of people. And, he was able to recognize most people by their shoes as he had made and/or repaired most of their shoes at least once. He had a wife, but she died, and all their children had died as well.

In grief, he denied God, wondering how God could allow such a thing to happen to him. One day a missionary visited Martin and Martin told him of his hardships. This missionary told Martin that he should live his life for God and not deny God. The missionary's words sank deep into Martin. After this encounter Martin went out and bought a large print Bible.

He began to read the Bible, at first only on holidays, but as he read more and more it became daily. His life became full with peace and joy. After his day of work he would sit down with a lamp and read. One night, Martin read a passage about a Pharisee who had invited Jesus into his house, and in the house a woman anointed and washed Jesus' feet with her tears. Martin thought of himself as the Pharisee in that story as he was only living for himself. As Martin slept, he thought he heard a voice telling him that God would visit Martin the next day.

The next morning Martin skeptically watched out his window for God. While he was searching for God, he saw a man shoveling away snow. Martin invited him in for a warm drink and they talked for a while. Martin told him about Jesus and the Pharisee and the man was moved to tears. When he left, the man thanked Martin for the food, both for the soul and body.

Martin later saw a young woman outside with a baby not properly dressed for the cold. He invited her in for some food and gave her warmer clothes and money. Martin also told her about Jesus and she thanked him and left. Then he saw a young boy stealing from an older lady. He went outside and settled their argument as he extended love and compassion towards the both of them.

That night while Martin wondered why God had not visited him, he saw the three people he'd shown hospitality to, when they appeared in his home. They said that when he helped them, he was helping God. Martin then realized that God had indeed visited him.

## II) Whom Do You See?

There are 24 parables told in Matthew's gospel writings. Today's text tells the final parable of Matthew's gospel, before Jesus foretells his suffering and death.

This is a common text, almost always used to describe who gets in and who doesn't as far as the kingdom of heaven's gate allows. It is also the fourth parable in a series, in Matthew's gospel, that challenges Jesus' listeners understanding around what it takes to be welcomed into God's Kingdom. Be on watch . . . For one never knows when the Son of God will come. And, always be conscious of those around you, and their needs. From this parable's story line; everyone wants to be a sheep, and be welcomed into the Kingdom of God!

The familiarity of this text, and its often-preached message of doing good works for others, along with the reality that Jesus tells those who've not done good works they **are unwelcome** into the Kingdom often fall upon our metaphorically deaf ears. It's not because we aren't listening. This parable is so often told, in the pulpit, in Sunday school classrooms, and – thanks to Stephen Schwartz and John-Michael Tebelak; this parable is presented with comedic clarity, sung by actors separated into goats and sheep in the musical GODSPELL! We all think we know this story . . . And maybe we do?!

This morning, I'd like to invite your ears to hear a side of this message that maybe no one has yet to offer. Along with the obvious message of preparation and entry into the Kingdom; this parable offers a chance for us to ask: "Where am I in this story? Am I in here at all?" Not in a selfish manner, but in a way that shows our own human vulnerability. And in those times of feeling vulnerable; we do not always have the eyes to see others in need, nor the ears to hear the cries of the poor.

This parable story offers easy advice, on the surface. Care for those who need. Offer food and drink. Give clothing. Welcome the stranger. Visit the sick and those in prison. Do all these things, to the least of the public, and the gates will be opened unto you. Simple formula. As church people we hear this message. We're encouraged to do all of these for others.

What happens when it's those who do for the least, who are the ones in need? Our pride often gets in the way of putting us out in front of others to ask for help. It's not just the obvious definitions of these words that qualify one to be hungry or naked, sick or imprisoned. I read in the Portland news last week about Mary Lou Smith of Scarborough. Smith, who is 79, has recently emerged as one of Maine's leading voices in the fight against domestic violence. Mary Lou's husband was a well-respected teacher, and a leader in the church community. No one knew that Mary Lou Smith spent 43 years in an abusive relationship. She lived all those years hiding her truth, ashamed and convinced no one would ever believe that her husband could do such terrible things.

Here is a woman who was imprisoned by her abusive husband, made naked in the stripping of her dignity, emotionally sick with fear, hungering for someone to see through her façade, and thirsting for justice to be done. Yet, she hid. She lived her life doing for her family, doing for those in need around the Scarborough community. Her needs were never seen by those around her, by her design.

The other morning, after parking my car at Hannaford's, I turned in my seat to open the door and get out. I looked at the driver next to me and saw that she was putting on her makeup. My first thought was

that she'd been running late, didn't have time before getting out of the house. Maybe the kids were running behind, so she made sure their lunches were packed forgetting her cosmetic needs over theirs? Maybe she was a Hannaford employee and wanted to put on makeup before going to clock in for her shift? I thought no more about this, wanting to get in and out of the store before heading to work.

When I returned, I noticed she was still in the car, and still putting on makeup. Having acted in theatre, and having to apply my own makeup; I know the process can be demanding. I hooked my seat belt, and started to back out of the parking spot. As I moved slowly into the lot; I noticed that this woman's car was filled with what I assumed were her possessions? What I observed were not grocery bags from a shopping trip, and the fact that the back of her car had a couple suitcases piled there gave me pause.

I drove out into the parking lot, and then onto the roads taking me to Brunswick. All I could think of was what I'd just witnessed. And, too; all I could do was curse my ignorance, and obsess over my assumptions. Had I parked next to someone who's car is now where she lives? Was her application of makeup an attempt to help her fit in? Or, was she perhaps heading to a job interview, hoping to find a way to no longer live out of her car? I even tried telling myself that she was on a long road trip, driving here from across the U.S. to visit friends in Maine. But, when I backed out of my parking spot, I saw that her car had Maine license plates.

I don't know this woman's story, but I could easily fit her needs into most of these categories described in today's gospel text. My "stuff" I know. I'd not seen her at an intersection with a cardboard sign asking for food or money. I'd not arrived at Hannaford at opening time when she might have been asleep in her car. She never looked at me when I got out or back into my car, nor looked away from her makeup mirror as I backed out of the parking spot.

These two stories. One that's true, and one that may or may not be true. These moments have stayed with me all week long. They've been the inspiration in my thinking, in this writing, and in the heart of some of my prayers. One clarification. These stories are not defined by age, gender, monetary worth, sexuality, religion, social class, or ethnicity. We all may carry the need for support within us. And, like the woman from Scarborough; sometimes our pride or shame may impede our movement out of the darkness and into a place of being seen and being heard.

Let not just the righteous be the ones who say: **Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? <sup>38</sup>And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? <sup>39</sup>And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?**

Let us be the ones who say: "Lord, teach us to look beyond what we see, to be open to the movement of your Holy Spirit, and to hear the prayers of your people.