

22 November 2020 Harbor Unitarian Universalist Congregation, Muskegon, MI
Matthew 25:31-46 “Incarnation Incognito”

I suppose we all have read stories in which the **hidden identity** of one or more characters contributes significantly to the narrative. While the device can serve sinister intent, more often I recall benevolent uses from works I read in high school. Three that especially come to mind share the common thread of powerful, influential or privileged individuals who choose to briefly sojourn incognito so as to **better understand** their society and in turn seek to **change** it.

In *Ivanhoe*, a romanticized tale of medieval chivalry by Sir Walter Scott, the identity of the Black Knight remains a mystery through much of the story. Early on he intervenes in a tournament on behalf of the title character and later takes a key role in storming Torquilstone Castle. While the author drops a few clues concerning the character's true identity, including an eye witness report to Prince John that his brother has returned from the Crusades, only among Locksley's (a.k.a. Robin Hood) band of thieves does the knight fully disclose that he is indeed Richard, King of England. Richard's experiences, largely among his Saxon subjects, allow him to better understand the injustices that had brought his realm close to civil war in his absence.

Mark Twain, on the other hand, aims his satirical wit at both the Age of Chivalry and his own Gilded Age in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. [I should note that Twain was particularly critical of the works of Sir Walter Scott, because many southern slaveholders had read those novels and liked to think of themselves as chivalrous feudal lords. This self-delusion persisted in the south long after the Civil War. The attitude played a significant role in Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*.] Well into the story, disguised as commoners, the Yankee (known as “the Boss”) and King Arthur explore the state of the kingdom. The Boss' hidden agenda for the adventure is to expose Arthur to the cruelties of the society over which he presides, so as to grease the way to social reform and technical advancement. Indeed the two suffer slavery and come close to being hung before their dramatic rescue by knights on bicycles. Unfortunately the Boss' dream of reform and a republic die in the conflict created by Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere's indiscretion.

The third book that comes to mind is the expose *Black Like Me*, in which white, southern author John Howard Griffin darkened his skin, shaved his head and traveled through the deep south as a black man for several weeks late in 1959. Griffin noted in his preface that he originally planned the project “as a scientific research study of the Negro in the South”. Instead he chose to make a far more personal and moving statement about racism by publishing a journal of his own experiences. Local reaction, when his project became public, forced Griffin's family to leave their hometown.

The **gospel lesson** I read a few minutes ago is also a story in which hidden identity plays an important role. Many Christian congregations, especially those that follow the Common Lectionary, will also hear the passage this morning on this **final Sunday of the liturgical year**. Next Sunday begins the season of Advent, in preparation for Christmas.

The literary context of our reading may offer some deeper understanding. Many scholars believe the **Gospel of Matthew** was organized around **five discourses surrounded by narratives** about the life of Jesus. This structure may serve as homage to the **first five books of the Hebrew Bible**, collectively known as the **Torah**. These discourses are essentially longer collections of teachings and stories told by Jesus. The first and likely best known is the Sermon on the Mount found in Ch. 5-7. The second is his instructions for the ministry of the 12 disciples in Ch. 10. The third is a series of parables in Ch. 13. The fourth in Ch. 18 contains instructions for life in the faith community. Our reading today comes from the fifth and final discourse in **Ch. 24-25**--a collection of **Jesus' eschatological or apocalyptic sayings**.

Eschatology is simply the study of **final things**. More often, I prefer the word **apocalypse**, which is rooted in a Greek verb “**to reveal or unveil**”. While our culture commonly focuses on descriptions of destruction and disaster in biblical apocalyptic literature, the point is to open our eyes to the **broader meaning of life and**

history. Suffering is key to that meaning and the ultimate intent is to encourage **perseverance**. It serves to alert us to the **realities** of this less-than-perfect world and as a wake-up call to **new possibilities**. 19th Century Unitarian minister **Theodore Parker's** quote about the **arc of the moral universe bending toward justice** is a good summary of this theme.

All **three Synoptic Gospels** share a good portion of apocalyptic material primarily found in **Mark 13**, **Luke 21** and **Matthew 24**. In each case, it appears in the text during the week prior to Jesus' execution and resurrection. The discussion begins with the disciples marveling at the grandeur of the Temple. Jesus responds that this too will pass away. Later the disciples press him privately to tell them when this will happen, giving Jesus the opportunity for a longer discussion. In the later verses of Ch. 24 Matthew adds a couple parables. Parallels to this material also appear in Luke, but in completely different contexts in Ch. 17 and 12. **Matthew's unique contribution** to the apocalyptic material is the **three parables** found in **Ch 25**: the **Ten Bridesmaids**, the **Talents** and the **Last Judgment**.

Parables are metaphors Jesus used in his teachings. Some are very **simple similes**, like the hidden growth of yeast in bread dough or the growth of a mustard seed into a large shrub. Perhaps more memorable are the **longer stories** such as the **Good Samaritan**, the **Prodigal Son** or the **Wedding Feast** among others. However, none of these metaphors possesses the detail of a full-blown allegory where each item of the story is an exact representation of something else. Jesus' stories often contain an **unexpected twist**, or at least elements that would have surprised his 1st Century audience. In the parable of the **mustard seed**, the idea of a peasant farmer purposely planting an invasive shrub in his field would seem ludicrous. The elderly father in the story of the **Prodigal Son** casts off all decorum to welcome back his wayward son. When invited guests find excuses to decline attending a **wedding feast**, a king sends his servants into the streets and alleys to invite commoners to the great banquet.

While the first two parables in Ch. 25 speak of remaining alert and a willingness to take risks, the third parable—the **Last Judgment**—reminds us that **compassion, empathy and hospitality** remain primary values regardless of our circumstances. The parable begins with a brief narrative setting the scene. The **king** first **commends** the righteous for their works of mercy. The righteous respond somewhat **confused**, leading the king to **clarify** his original speech. The formula of speech, confusion and clarification is **repeated** between the king and the unrighteous, reinforcing the point. To be alert and prepared is not just about personal safety and private interest even in the most trying times. Our business, to paraphrase Dickens' Jacob Marley is humankind; the common welfare, charity, mercy, forbearance and benevolence are all our business. The **works of mercy** listed in the king's speeches to both the righteous and the unrighteous were as familiar to Judaism as they are in Christian teaching: **to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, cloth the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned**.

The twist in the story is when **the king reveals** that any time they helped or not helped **someone in need** [the least of these] they were **helping or not helping him**. **Both groups are surprised**. The idea was not new. **Midrash on Deuteronomy 15: 9**, part of a passage on the Sabbatical and Jubilee, expresses a similar thought. **Proverbs 19:17** also states "**Whoever is kind to the poor lends to YHWH, and will be repaid in full.**" There is also the sense from **Genesis** that we all are made in the image of God.

Around Christmas Christian communities **will re-read John 1:1-18**, the prologue to John's Gospel. The poetry powerfully summarizes Jesus' mission, particularly in the line, "**And the Word became flesh and lived among us...**" (v. 14). In this sense, in the life of Jesus, God **walked in our shoes, lived in our skin, became one of us**. From that unique position, he offers reconciliation and issues the invitation "Follow me." An earlier line reflects the **relative obscurity of the incarnation**. Neither the world nor his own people recognized him (vv. 10-11). **The event could be described as incarnation incognito**. Consider that Luke and Matthew report only a short list of folks privy to the significance of Jesus' birth: Mary and Joseph, perhaps Elizabeth and Zechariah, the shepherds, the elderly Simeon and Anna, the Magi and inadvertently Herod and

advisers. Later stories from Jesus' active ministry indicate that even **his most loyal supporters failed to understand fully his mission**. For instance, **John the Baptist** sent messengers from his prison cell asking, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus replied, "Go tell John what you hear and see..." ailing bodies are healed, the dead are raised and good news is shared with the poor (Matt. 11:2-15). Though other clues appeared along the way, **full disclosure came by means of the double action in Jesus' death and resurrection**. In that event, God was most revealed to humankind. In the light of the Christ event **we are unmasked for who we are, but more importantly, we are allowed to see who we might become**. We are offered the opportunity to live differently.

Another way to understand this parable is in terms of the larger web of our **interdependent relationships** in the world. The strands, though not always visible, connect us to each other and the Divine. It is the recognition of what **Archbishop Desmond Tutu** observed, "**My humanity is bound up in yours, for we can only be human together.**" This is not simply a transactional relationship in which we trade favors. Rather it is recognition of the gifts we have received, and with a sense of gratitude pass them on to others.

I owe some of that thought to a conversation near the end of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* between Tom Joad and his mother. **Tom is in hiding** following a fight with strikebreakers in which the Joad family's preacher friend Casy was killed and Tom suffered a nasty face wound. His mother has stealthily brought him some food, but also some cash so that he can leave the area. Much of Tom's thoughts turn to memories of **things Casy had said**:

"But now I been thinkin' what he said, an' I can remember--all of it. Says one time he went out in the wilderness to find his own soul, an' he foun' he didn' have no soul that was his'n. Says he foun' he jus' got a little piece of a great big soul. Says a wilderness ain't no good, 'cause his little piece of a soul wasn't no good 'less it was with the rest, an' was whole....I know now a fella ain't no good alone."

Tom then recalls Casey quoting **Ecclesiastes 4:9-12**: "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow; but woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up. Again, if two lie together, they are warm; but how can one be warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him. A threefold cord is not quickly broken."

A bit later Tom continues:

"I been thinkin' how it was in that gov'ment camp, how our folks took care a theirselves, an' if they was a fight they fixed it theirselves; an' they wasn't no cops wagglin' their guns, but they was better order than them cops ever give. I been wonderin' why we can't do that all over."

A bit later, he tells "Ma" that he plans continue Casy's grass roots organizing, causing her to worry remembering they killed Casy. "**How'm I gonna know 'bout you? They might kill ya an' I wouldn' know. They might hurt ya. How'm I gonna know?**"

Tom Laughed uneasily, 'Well maybe like Casy says, a fella ain't got a soul of his own, but only a piece of a big one—an' then---

'Then what, Tom?'

'Then it don't matter. Then I'll be all aroun' in the dark. I'll be ever'where—wherever you look. Where they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever they's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there. If Casy knowed, why I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad an'—I'll be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry an' they know supper's ready. An' when our folks eat the stuff they raise an' live in the houses they build—why, I'll be there. See? I'm talkin' like Casy. Comes of thinkin' about him so much. Seems like I can see him sometimes.'

'I don't un'erstan', 'Ma said, I don' really know.'

'Me neither,' said Tom, 'It's jus' stuff I been thinkin' about.'

In Tom Joad's words I hear an echo of Jesus.

The incarnation still comes to us incognito. Will we recognize Jesus when we meet him?