

## **Liberty and Justice For All**

### **Matthew 25:31-46**

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Believe it or not (I hardly believe it!), I am old enough to remember the last time we celebrated a big national birthday. It was 1976, I was 10 years old, and I remember asking my mom what “bicentennial” means. Red, white, and blue lined the streets that year. Every shop window was decorated. Every town had a special event (at least one), neighborhoods had block parties, people re-enacted the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Our small town made the bicentennial the theme of our annual fall festival, the Festival of the Forks. At school, we prepared for weeks to march in the Festival parade. We learned to sing “Fifty, Nifty United States”, put together costumes so we could dress up like the first colonists, and made signs telling important facts about each of the original colonies. On parade day, I wore a colonial bonnet and proudly carried a sign about the glorious history of Connecticut.

That was when I learned that there are certain birthdays that belong not just to a person or to a family but to a people. A nation. Two hundred and fifty years ago, a remarkable experiment began. Imperfect from its first breath and yet filled with astonishing aspirations, this nation declared that liberty belonged not only to the privileged but to all people.

Naturally, this birthday invites gratitude for that promise and many more. Yet, it also invites truth-telling. If you have ever celebrated the ninetieth birthday of someone you love, you know that no one stands to offer a toast by pretending the years were easy. We tell stories that make us laugh. We remember moments of courage. We acknowledge sorrow and regret. We celebrate not because life has been perfect but because grace has carried us through.

Perhaps nations deserve the same kind of honesty. Today we give thanks for the gifts of this nation—for the freedoms protected by our Constitution, for the beauty of rugged coasts and lazy rivers, majestic mountains and fields of grain, for the democracy first envisioned by our founding fathers and our democratic institutions that continue to evolve, for generations who struggled to expand liberty and communities built by people from every corner of the earth.

And we remember that we have always struggled to keep the promise of liberty for all people. Our story is also marked by slavery and segregation, by the dispossession of Indigenous peoples, by exclusion and injustice, by promises delayed for many who still waited outside the circle of “We the People.”

We carry all of this together - gratitude and repentance. Because we are human, we cannot help but feel them both. Because we love our country, we cannot help but share them both. The question is what we do in response to them. Which brings us to today's Gospel.

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory...all the nations will be gathered before him.” Notice it doesn’t say all the Christ-followers or all the churches or all the disciples. It says “all the nations”. With these words, Matthew gives us an extraordinary vision. Every empire, every republic, every kingdom, every democracy, every people—all stand before Christ for judgement.

Historically, nations have judged each other. We hear it all the time. Which country is the strongest? The richest? The greatest? Yet, in this passage, Matthew reverses that. The nations are not judging each other. They are being judged - by God - with a very different set of criteria.

Walter Brueggemann was a biblical scholar and theologian who spent much of his life helping the Church recover what he calls the “prophetic imagination”. He reminds us that Scripture always offers two ways of seeing the world. There is the imagination of empire. And there is the imagination of God's kingdom.

Empire is always asking the same questions. How strong are we? How much do we possess? Who belongs? Who threatens us? How do we secure ourselves? Empire counts wealth. Empire measures power. Empire protects itself.

But Jesus speaks in the language of the kin-dom, and suddenly the measures of greatness change. Jesus says, "I was hungry." "I was thirsty." "I was a stranger." "I was naked." "I was sick." "I was in prison." Jesus doesn't ask whether the nations were prosperous. He doesn't ask whether they won their wars. He doesn't ask whether their borders were secure or their markets were flourishing. Instead, he asks whether they noticed the people empire teaches us not to notice. The hungry. The stranger. The sick. The imprisoned.

The measure of a nation, Jesus says, is found not in the strength of its economy or the might of its military but in the way it treats its most vulnerable neighbors. This reversal of priorities is so dramatic that both the sheep and the goats are bewildered.

“When did we see you?”, they ask. “When were you hungry, sick, imprisoned? When did you stand, a stranger at our border, begging to come in?” They don't realize that Jesus has been with them all along. Not in the Emperor's palace. Not in the halls of power. Not in the towering figures of Mount Rushmore or the chambers of congress. Christ was hidden in ordinary human need.

Matthew 25 tells us that Christ comes to us every day disguised as the neighbor we might otherwise overlook. The child whose lunch account is empty. The immigrant family whose father has been deported. The elderly neighbor who has not spoken with another person all week. The trans kid considering suicide. The prisoner whose humanity everyone else has forgotten. The person sleeping outside on the portico.

Brueggemann once wrote that "the prophetic task of the church is to tell the truth in a society that lives in illusion." One of the illusions many countries face at some time is the belief that their own greatness is the measure of God's blessing. We hear this in the language of Christian nationalism which teaches that our country has been chosen by God to be exceptional, to be special, the most powerful, the richest.

However, scripture never allows us that illusion. The prophets never measured Israel by the splendor of Solomon's Temple or the size of David's army. They measured Israel by widows and orphans, by strangers and the poor. Throughout the Bible, in the old testament and the new, the question is the same all along. How are the people with the least power? Because that is where God is looking.

This is why the Church must be careful whenever faith becomes too closely entwined with national identity. Love of country can be a beautiful thing. Christians should be good citizens. We should vote. Serve. Volunteer. Work for justice. Pray for our leaders. Love our neighbors.

But whenever we begin to imagine that God's purposes and our nation's purposes are always the same, we have wandered into dangerous territory. The Church's first loyalty has never been to a nation. Our first loyalty is to the risen Christ whose kingdom stretches beyond every border and whose family includes every tribe, language, and people. When the cross becomes merely a symbol of national identity, it ceases to be the cross of Jesus. Because the cross forever reminds us that God chose vulnerability instead of domination, mercy instead of vengeance, self-giving love instead of coercive power.

Which leads me to say that on this 250th anniversary of our great country, I wonder whether Matthew invites us to ask different questions than the ones we usually ask about our nation. Not whether we are the greatest. But whether we are becoming more merciful. Not whether we are feared. But whether children are fed. Not whether we dominate the world. But whether strangers find welcome. Not whether we are winning. But whether our neighbors are flourishing.

Jesus insists that God's kin-dom is already pressing into the present every time someone chooses compassion over fear, hospitality over suspicion, generosity over scarcity. As Brueggemann often reminds us, prophets are not primarily predictors of the future. They are poets of God's future. They paint word pictures to help people imagine a world that empire insists cannot exist. A world of equality and justice, mutual respect and compassionate love.

The Church is called to that same holy imagination. Our task is not simply to criticize the world. Our calling is to live our lives, so we bear witness to God's kingdom. To live now as though God's promised future were already true. Every time we feed someone who is hungry. Every time we welcome a stranger. Every time we refuse to let fear have the final word. Every time we insist that every human being bears the image of God. Every time we choose reconciliation over resentment. The Kingdom becomes visible.

That may be the greatest gift the Church can offer America on her 250th birthday. The imagination to believe that our neighbors are more important than our fears. That generosity is stronger than scarcity. That truth is more healing than denial. That mercy is more enduring than power.

One day, Jesus says, all the nations will stand before him. When we do, he will not look at how patriotic we are or how we sanitized history to take out the evils of our past and those of the present. He will look to our hearts. May we be among those to whom Christ says, "I was hungry, and you gave me food. I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger, and you welcomed me."

May it be so. Amen.