

Armageddon When?

By Rev. Joe Connolly

“And the ruler answered, ‘The truth is, every time you did this for the least of these who are members of my family, my brothers and sisters, you did it for me.’” — Matthew 25:40.

Those of you who have personal computers and are connected to the social media platform known as Facebook probably know I have a Facebook page. And those of you connected to the social media platform, Facebook, probably know that, except for making an occasional comment and posting my sermons on Facebook, I rarely do anything on that page.

I already lead a busy life. I just do not have those kind of extra minutes in my day which might allow me to spend time posting on Facebook, thank you. (Slight pause.)

I take that back. I have been occasionally known to post a terrible pun or joke. But other than a comment, sermons and an occasional terrible pun or joke— and it can be hard to tell the difference between the sermons and the jokes— I rarely post anything.

Now, on a more serious note, those of you who know Facebook probably know there is something you can do with it which might even rate as worthwhile. That’s belong to groups where information can be exchanged with a select membership.

For instance, our choir and bell choir has a closed group so members can keep up to speed on rehearsals and other things. (And I have noticed some also post an occasional pun or joke on that page!)

Of course, another reason for closed groups is to gather a select set of people who have something in common and can seek support because of conversations in these groups. These range from groups formed because of an illness folks have in common, to a family group, to people who have a common profession.

That having been said, it should not be a surprise if I said I belong to several clergy groups. And, equally, it should not be a surprise that I rarely post in any of those groups, either. I already lead a busy life, etc., etc., etc.

There was, however, a recent post that caught my attention in one of those clergy groups and I did respond. One of our young U.C.C. pastors— young meaning 35— posted this question. “When was the first time you did not feel safe?” 9/11 was the first time this pastor had not felt safe.

The math here is obvious since this pastor is 35. 9/11 was 16 years ago and this pastor was probably a Freshman or a Sophomore in College when that happened.

Others, perhaps unintentionally, disclosed their age because of the incidents cited. The JFK assassination in '63, the Challenger disaster in '86 were both named.

Now, perhaps I broke with my usual practice and responded because my reaction to this was very personal, very emotional. I did not reference any national trauma.

I related on that post a brief version of the story I’ve told here. “I was an inner city kid in the 1950s,” I said. “Safety? I saw a person being mugged outside the house in which my family lived when I was about five. I got my Mom. She called the police.”

“Safety? Real safety exists, ever?” said I. “I knew very early that real safety was and is an illusion.” (Slight pause.)

I, in fact, kept thinking about that question “When was the first time you did not feel safe?” For days I kept thinking about it. That led to some reflection about my family.

What I realized is the incident I described certainly was an example of feeling not safe. But perhaps my deep emotions around the question came from family of origin issues. Let me say something about that, also something I’ve said here before.

Around the same time as the mugging I just described, when I was about five, my Father had what they called in those days a nervous breakdown. Today we would recognize that incident as the onset of a mental illness which goes by two names: passive dependency and passive aggression.

But the result was that, at a very early age, I needed to start thinking like an adult. You see, my father was physically present but did not fully accept that role— adult. Someone had to. I, perhaps unwittingly, took it on, despite my age. (Slight pause.)

These words are found in the Gospel we call Matthew: “And the ruler answered, ‘The truth is, every time you did this for the least of these who are members of my family, my brothers and sisters, you did it for me.’” (Slight pause.)

The reading from Matthew we heard today addresses what is commonly called the eschaton, the final event in the divine plan, the so called end of the world. It appears among a series of apocalyptic parables about the final days.

But, in a real way, these are not simply apocalyptic parables. These are apocalyptic dramas and are meant to be seen as dramas, set pieces, illustrations.

Why? Perhaps we need to ask this question: ‘Was Jesus simply addressing the end of time or is there something else going on here? (Slight pause.)

So, what *is* going on here? The ruler clearly states some have fed the hungry, given drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, took care of the ill and visited the imprisoned. (Slight pause.)

You see, time and again and time and again the message of Jesus has to do with perfection. For proof of that statement— that Jesus has a message about perfection— please see the Sermon on the Mount from this Gospel. That’s about perfection. Therefore, the message of Jesus has to do with making a broken world whole.

Hence, I would posit that all the parables about the eschaton, the final days, are not about the so called end of time. These are stories, dramas, set pieces, illustrations about a time when the world is cleansed of *imperfection*.

These are stories, dramas, set pieces, illustrations about a time when the mercy of God and the giving God offers becomes available through us. This is about a time when the mercy of God and the giving God offers is embodied by us, the people of God.

These are stories, dramas, set pieces, illustrations about the vision God has for the world, a vision of the world. This is about perfection and it is clear that it’s our responsibility to act in ways which will bring about this

perfection by feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, taking care of the ill and visiting the imprisoned. (Slight pause.)

I think this reading raises many issues we moderns need to ponder. But there two clear ones: our own mortality and our own safety. It is nearly redundant to say these two are intertwined.

Hence, I would like to be so bold as to suggest two things. The first restates what I new at a very early age: “Safety? Real safety exists, ever?” The second asks, ‘What is real safety?’ (Slight pause.)

I think I may have been right as a youngster. Real safety is not available. And I think we simply need to grapple with that, come to terms with that. But asking ‘what is safety?’ is a different issue and, I think, the actual point being made here by Jesus.

Real safety is about the advent of the Dominion of God. And real safety can be found in perfection. And this is what that perfection looks like: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, taking care of those who are ill, visiting the imprisoned.

And it is we who are commissioned to embody real safety. Hence, the challenge Jesus presents to us, the challenge with which these apocalyptic stories confront us is simple. Are we willing to take on the task of embodying the message of safety Jesus presents? Amen.

11/26/2017

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ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: “For those worried about the approaching the end of the world as we know it, please stop worrying. I can predict when the world, as we know it, will end. It will end when we achieve the perfection of feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, taking care of those who are ill and visiting the imprisoned. Now, we can be heartened or discouraged by that. Either way, it should clear what the call of Jesus on our lives really is.”

BENEDICTION: Go forth in faith. Go forth trusting that God will provide. Go forth and reach out to everyone you meet in the name of Christ. And may the peace of Christ which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of the Holy Spirit this day and forevermore. Amen.