

## DEVOTIONAL

## COMPASSION WITH ACTION

By Frances Lee Menlove

**M**ATTHEW'S PARABLE OF the final great division of the sheep and goats is a discomfiting story. It shakes us awake. This parable pushes us to ask ourselves, 'What if God isn't playing by our rules?'

You remember how it goes. Matthew places Jesus inside the story and describes the great separation. The Son of Man will separate people, one from another, as a shepherd separates sheep from goats. The sheep will go on the right, the goats on the left. He will then say to those on his right:

Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for 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, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.

To those on his left he will say:

You that are accursed, depart from me into eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me. (Matthew 25:34–36; 41–43, NRSV)

The reaction of those on either side of him is identical. They are nonplussed, thunderstruck. Neither the sheep nor the goats have a clue as to what he is talking about. Both sides ask the same question: Lord, when was it we saw you? The sheep ask:

When was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or

thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?

And the sheep get that famous answer, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Matthew 25:37–40).

And the goats ask, "When was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?" They get an equally well-known answer. "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me" (Matthew 25:44–45).

**W**HEN was it that we saw you, Lord?" The identical question from the sheep, who are totally unaware of the good they did, and from the goats, who are unaware they did anything wrong.

In this story, the final performance appraisal reduces all criteria to compassion. There is not a whisper about creeds or doctrine. There is not a word about cursing, or attendance at church meetings, or homosexuality. Nothing about fame, knowledge, or fortune. It is so simple it's scary.

Actually, that's not quite correct. It does not simply reduce to compassion. The difference between the sheep and the goats is action. It is compassion with action. The goats are goats because of inaction. They did nothing. There is no indication they had hostility or any ill will. They didn't do anything wicked, they just failed to do good. Those who take action—feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, clothe the naked, take care of the sick, and visit the imprisoned—are the sheep. They're in. People who don't

are the goats. They're out.

Like most parables, this one is subversive. It subverts the common understanding of the last judgment. In the final analysis, what counts is not about belonging to the right group or believing the right things. Even good intentions don't cut it. What counts is action. Compassion with action.

I imagine all of us here have at times been sheep, and probably we have all been goats. We are seldom all good or all bad, but the point is stark. When we fail the needy, we fail Jesus. When we neglect the homeless, we neglect Jesus. When we persecute outcasts, we are persecuting Jesus. This story makes judgment present and continuous, and in essence makes the needy our judge. I heard the Reverend James Forbes make this point a different way. "Nobody," he asserted, "gets into heaven without a letter of reference from the poor."

The whole biblical tradition involves special care for victims, the poor, the widow, the stranger, the oppressed, the dispossessed. Kings are held accountable for how the poor fare. Prophets rail about the gap between the rich and the poor as a reason for God's judgment.

But the Bible is concerned not only with suffering but also with *causes* of suffering. In fact, it could be argued that "the Bible is less concerned with alleviating the effects of injustice, than in eliminating its causes." William Sloan Coffin puts it this way: "Said prophet Amos, 'Let justice'—not charity—'roll down like mighty waters,' and for good reason: whereas charity alleviates the effects of poverty, justice seeks to eliminate the causes of it."<sup>1</sup>

**I**T is a lot easier to talk about charity than about social justice. Social justice talk leads to political controversy. But ignoring social justice issues because they raise political issues is itself a very political position in favor of the status quo. We are called on to be more than an effective and compassionate ambulance service. It is important to save poor orphans from burning buildings, but it is also vital to work toward a society where orphans are not poor and buildings adhere to fire codes.

In other words, as followers of Jesus, we are called not only to care for those who are suffering, but also to transform the conditions that bring about suffering. Social justice is different from charity. Charity is often the Band-Aid that covers injustice.

What makes a society just? The philosopher John Rawls proposes a thought experiment for teasing out the answer—in fact,



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what he proposes feels rather like a Mormon kind of thought experiment.

Pretend with me for a moment that we are in heaven, waiting to get our earthly bodies. We are all sitting around that great conference table in the sky with several other spirits-in-waiting. Our group is given the assignment of designing the basic social contract for the society in which we will live. We are not permitted to know our class, our race, our gender, our religion, our genetic make-up, nor our gifts or handicaps. We are behind what Rawls calls a “veil of ignorance.” We don’t know if we will be a sharecropper or a musician, a board chair or janitor, sighted or blind, or the parent of a severely

new urgency. When we are forced to ignore all knowledge that might lead us to self-interest rather than our sense of social justice, when we don’t know who we will be, we sign up only for arrangements that protect us no matter the luck of the draw. In other words, a vision for the general good, a vision of justice as fairness. A remembrance that we live in community.

So what do these people of good will actually decide behind this veil of ignorance? They generally opt for traditional religious liberties and political liberties with protections for the equality of all citizens. Economically they permit inequalities, but only when the circumstances that create in-

placed deliberately behind a veil of ignorance. Rawls comes up with two principles of social justice: first, each person should have the right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a like liberty for others; and second, social and economic inequalities should be arranged so they advantage the worst off.<sup>2</sup>

This thought experiment is a little like the instruction we heard as children and then used as parents when there were two kids and only one coveted brownie left in the pan. “Okay, you two kids, quit arguing. One of you gets to cut the brownie; the other gets to choose. That settles it.”

One divides; the other chooses. This clever little rule of division harnesses greed and makes for fairness. If people don’t know if they will be a winner or loser, smart or dumb, Christian or Jew, Muslim or atheist, straight or gay, they sign on to arrangements that protect them whatever happens. They design public institutions to ameliorate some of the burdens of bad luck. They take luck seriously. Luck—all the gifts and all the curses for which we can take neither credit nor blame. The lottery of life.

*And the point is to understand that Jesus is always standing around us in the disguise of those who suffer.*

handicapped child. In other words, our initial earthly circumstances will depend on the luck of the draw.

Where does this little thought experiment take us? I’ve tried it with church groups and philosophy classes. Put people in small groups and ask them to spend a couple of hours hashing out the kind of society they want to be dropped into, and the results are pretty consistent.

First, our spirits-in-waiting have to take luck seriously—very seriously. Luck is all those gifts and all those curses for which we can take neither credit nor blame. If we take luck seriously, the boundaries of empathy are enlarged, and good schools for poor children, clean drinking water, living wages, and affordable, accessible health care take on a

equalities also provide opportunities for the least to improve their lot as well. “Capitalism with a human face” was the way one student expressed it. One salty old journalist told the group at the end of a half-day session that for him, the exercise was very disconcerting, even destabilizing. He said he was going to have to rethink his opposition to universal health care.

“Strong safety nets” is another frequently heard phrase in these thought experiment discussions. My favorite comment came from a young college student: “Social policy must at least ensure that we are equal to become unequal.”

Rawls contends that the moral point of view, justice as fairness, is the position that reasonable people are forced to take when

**T**AKING luck seriously is hard. Do you know the most frequently quoted Bible verse that is not in the Bible? It is this: “God helps those who help themselves.” Three-quarters of Americans believe this phrase is in the Bible. It’s not. Actually, Benjamin Franklin said it, and it is counter-biblical.

It certainly doesn’t sound like Jesus as he separates the sheep and the goats. “God helps those who help themselves” also doesn’t sound much like “love your neighbor as yourself,” or “love your enemies,” or “bless them that curse you,” or “when you do it to the least of them, you do it to me.” It is hard for us to be reminded that so much of what we have is due to luck—the good luck of family, health, talents, timing. It can be unsettling to abandon that rather American myth that rich people are divinely entitled to their wealth and poor people are to blame for their want.

The notion that poverty is simply a reward for sin or laziness cannot survive what we now know about the dynamics that shape human societies. We know about the effects of racism, of sexism, of discrimination, and we know unfairness happens, and it

**Pontius' Puddle**



happens more regularly and more routinely if the social systems aren't alert to their effects. Systems matter. It is no longer possible to maintain the simplistic notion that people get what they deserve. We have to take luck seriously. The world is not fair. The rain falls on the righteous and the unrighteous (Matthew 5: 45). Natural disasters harm anyone in their path.

Remember Job's friends, who marveled how wicked he must be to deserve so much punishment? Those "comforters" tried to explain Job's apparently undeserved suffering by arguing that he really *did* deserve it, that it was God's punishment. Job resisted this pious orthodoxy, and it was shot out of the water by God's rebuke from the whirlwind.

**W**E are called to see Jesus in other people, even the sick whom we disdain because we believe their illness is a result of their lifestyle, even the prisoner whom we find reprehensible, even the stranger whom we fear, and even the hungry, who after all, should be able to take care of themselves.

If we hope to attend to the impact of systems on people's lives, we must examine our political positions not just from our own point of view, but from the viewpoint of the least among us. We need to look beyond self-interest and work toward the common interest. We need to ask why people are hungry or thirsty or naked or in need of medical care or in prison. We are called to look at the structures that keep people from earning the food they need, the policies that keep people from having clean drinking water, the injustices in our criminal justice system.

For any policy we must ask: Does this policy seek the common good? Does it reflect care for the poor and protect the vulnerable? Who benefits and who suffers? Who wins and who loses? Indifference to the public sphere is anti-biblical.

Charity and almsgiving are indispensable in our world. But systemic problems can't be solved by charity and almsgiving. The scandals of workplace safety come to mind. Collective action is needed to find solutions to problems that are beyond the power of any of us to deal with as individuals or as churches. Strong levees, clean air and water, truth-telling on financial reports, building codes that keep buildings standing during earthquakes, excellent schools. Collective action is needed to solve what Martin Luther King Jr. described as the most shocking and inhumane injustice: injustice in health care. And, since watching the movie *An Inconvenient Truth* recently, I have been won-

dering if we are now not only called to hear the groaning of the poor, but also the groaning of our planet.

The story of the sheep and the goats subverts our usual understanding of the last judgment, our understanding of what really counts. Why? The point, I believe, is to help us squelch our inner goat and nourish our inner sheep, to live like Jesus taught us, even in his absence. And the point is to understand that Jesus is always standing around us in the disguise of those who suffer. This is a daunting task, and I believe taking luck seriously helps.

We have to resist the narrow vision that makes us eager to do charity only. We are called to deal also with what causes people to need charity. If we took luck seriously, we would be on our way to fixing some of our fixable injustices. Remember Micah's injunction: "And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8) If we took luck seriously, we might have an easier time with the "do justice" part of that admonition. A healthy awe for luck might help us move toward being a little more sheeplike and a little less goatish.

In what may well be a first for any Sunstone forum, I am going to quote Bono, U2's lead singer. Listen to what Bono said as he addressed the National Prayer Breakfast.

Look, whatever thoughts you have about God, . . . most will agree that, if there is a God, He has a special place for the poor. In fact, the poor are where God lives. Check Judaism. Check Islam. Check pretty much anyone. I mean, God may well be with us in our mansions on the hill. . . . I hope so. He may well be with us as in all manner of controversial stuff . . . maybe, maybe not. . . . But the one thing we can all agree, all faiths and ideologies, is that God is with the vulnerable and poor. God is in the slums, in the cardboard boxes where the poor play house. . . . God is in the silence of a mother who has infected her child with a virus that will end both their lives. . . . God is in the cries heard under the rubble of war. . . . God is in the debris of wasted opportunity and lives, and God is with us, if we are with them.<sup>3</sup>

And God is with us, if we are with them.

Finally, I will end with an old Latin American prayer. It is a short prayer. I will share it twice.

*Lord, to those who hunger, give bread.  
And to those who have bread, give the  
hunger for justice.*

*Lord, to those who hunger, give bread.  
And to those who have bread, give the  
hunger for justice.*

Amen.



## NOTES

1. William Sloane Coffin, *The Heart Is a Little to the Left* (Hanover and London: University of New England Press, 1999), 16.
2. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).
3. Bono, National Prayer Breakfast, 2 February 2006, <http://www.data.org/archives/000774.php> (accessed 28 March 2006).



## MADONNA

At the foot  
of the cross  
her face redraws  
the scars of sacrifice.  
Sorrow soaks her  
to the ground  
like a bended S.

Brackish with her  
first born's blood,  
her tears shower  
earth for hours,  
laving bone-dry  
landscapes lost  
since the dawn of time  
until the slope  
of human hope  
finds bedrock footing  
in her steely yes.

The axis  
of the world  
tilts the aerial  
of earth toward home  
when she rises  
with the sun  
from the chrisem plash

—JEROME L. MCELROY