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“Final Interview”

Matthew 25:31-46

George C. Anderson

David Henry served faithfully as a Baptist minister and then in his retirement enjoyed being a Presbyterian parishioner. David read the kind of books I am drawn to and after he joined the Church Triumphant and Nancy decided to downsize, something needed to be done with his extensive library. So, Nancy made David’s books available to the ministers and library of Second Presbyterian Church. I already read, or at least own, many of David’s books and my own library shelves have little room for more tenants. Nevertheless, there were a few too enticing not to take.

Like *The Collected Sermons of Fred Craddock*. Fred Craddock’s books *about* preaching had a huge impact on me when I was first learning how to “talk good” in the pulpit. I went out of my way to hear Craddock preach and teach. He was short, balding and his voice was anything but booming—he described it once as a “thin reed whistling in the wind.” But he preached with such eloquence that those who listened were riveted.

In short, I am a fan. Yet, while I owned his books *about* preaching, until Nancy made it available to me, I didn’t own any books of his sermons. Now I have his sermons to read.

And it is an odd experience. Don’t get me wrong, they’re wonderful, but he crafts sermons to be heard and not read, and to be heard in particular contexts. Other published preachers adapt their sermons for the page and wipe away the names and references the reader wouldn’t recognize. Craddock didn’t do that—at least not much. He leaves in the incomplete sentences and the asides: the comments on that day’s weather, the humorous observations inspired in the moment.

For instance, there were those observations that came of preaching in a church for a first time. One time, right before he was to preach, the choir sang an anthem and then, for some



reason, filed out of the choir loft. Craddock began his sermon by saying, “I am reminded of the passage, *‘They forsook him and fled.’*”

Another time, Craddock, who stood about 5 foot 4 inches¹, rose to preach in a pulpit that was a bit taller than normal. As if he heard what the congregation was thinking, he declared, “I *am* standing!

What has any of this to do with my sermon this morning? Not much, really. I’m just beginning a sermon the way Craddock often did, kind of warming the congregation up with off-the-point-reflections and a bit of humor. Who knows? Maybe if someday a book is published called, *The Collected Sermons of George Anderson*, a blurb on the back might read, “Like Fred Craddock, George Anderson preaches... only with more height, hair and a louder voice.”

Notice I didn’t say, “George Anderson preaches *like* Fred Craddock. No one can preach like Fred Craddock. I’m still trying to learn to preach like Fred would want George Anderson to preach.

Besides paying homage to Craddock, there is one reason I’ve rambled on about Craddock. In the book from David’s library, I read a sermon Craddock preached on a passage I normally avoid because it is hard to hear. Craddock points out that it might be important we hear it, because it is the last sermon Jesus preaches in Matthew’s Gospel. For Matthew, this might be the most important thing Jesus has to say.

Here's what Jesus says:

³¹ “When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³ and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴ Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, ³⁵ 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, ³⁶ 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.’ ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ ⁴⁰ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.’ ⁴¹ Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You who are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels, ⁴² for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ 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.’ ⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, 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?’ ⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, ‘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.’ ⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment but the righteous into eternal life.”

¹ That’s a guess based on my memory of looking down at someone to whom I looked up.



The story goes that Charlie Chaplain entered a Charlie-Chaplain-Look-Alike competition. He came in 20th place.

At least that is what *The Straits Times* of Singapore reported in 1920. Maybe it was 27th place, which is what the *Poverty Bay Herald* and the *Albany Advertiser* reported? Or fourth place? That's how Craddock heard it.

I don't know, maybe the story is made up, but I find it believable. There were more Chaplain impersonators in the 1920s than there are Elvis impersonators today... and then as now, some were uncannily good (You ought to see Doug Settle's impersonation of Elvis). And, back then, the judgement would be passed based on grainy black and white movies.

What if all the contestants were behind a screen and a judgment had to be made not on how they looked but what they said? You know, like *The Dating Game*. Where would Charlie Chaplain place then?

Or what if, behind that screen, there was Jesus and a bunch of Jesus Impersonators? What place would Jesus come in?

I'd be scared to find out. I suspect I would be one of those who would choose the Jesus that suits me—a Jesus

- who reflects my views,
- who stands on the same side of issues as me,
- and though I am certain Jesus loves everyone,
 - a Jesus who would shake his head and laugh at my snark over those who don't get it like Jesus and I get it.

Back in grade school and Junior High, I would have had to choose between *two different Jesuses*. There was the Jesus given to me by my parents and congregations:

- the Jesus who loved me unconditionally,
- the one I counted on to get me out of jams,
- the one who understood me when no one else did.

But there was also the Jesus of so much of the culture of the deep south in which I lived. At school, in the neighborhood and on TV, the loudest deep-south-take on Jesus was a Jesus who scared the fire out of me. Our passage was used to fuel fear. At the end of time, or even at the end of one's life, a final reckoning will take place—a final accounting of your life. The good and the bad of your life would be tallied and the scales would be tipped, either launching you to heaven or dumping you into hell.

That's what I heard. And I heard that some sins weigh more heavily in the balance than others... and it was confusing because it seemed so easy to trip up. Some of the sins that I was told weighed especially heavy with God did not seem like such a big deal in real life, sins like

- sex thoughts,
- believing what the Catholics believed,



- or mowing the lawn on Sunday.

And then there was the sin so heavy that it didn't matter how many good thoughts and deeds were piled up on the other side of the scale. Paul called it "the *unforgivable sin*." This one sin would turn the whole scale over in the wrong direction. Since that sin was only vaguely defined as a "sin against the Holy Spirit," an opening was left for the deep south preacher to define it for you. It might be

- hearing the Gospel and not accepting it,
- or not cooperating with the Spirit by speaking in tongues,
- or calling yourself a Christian when you haven't joined the right church.

Scary! So easy to get crosswise with God!

You know, it's always a good idea to place what a passage says beside what others say it says. In this case, I think it will help, even though Jesus will still come across as harsh and demanding. What if this passage is not a literal description but simply a parable?

Simply a parable. There is nothing simple about this parable because a parable is like a crystal in that it refracts light in many directions. But let's read the passage the way a parable is supposed to be read—on the slant? By that, I mean parables are always about something other than what they are literally talking about.

- The parables in Luke 15 that Millie Snyder helped us think about—
 - the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost two sons—are at least in part about
 - exclusion and embrace,
 - the ways we exclude ourselves by excluding others,
 - and the ways God keeps going to where we have exiled ourselves to bring us back in.
- The parable of the irritating widow banging on the judge's door is about not giving up on justice. At least in part.
- At least in part,
 - the parable about the mustard seed is about faith,
 - the parable about the Good Samaritan is about loving neighbors who are different,
 - the parable about hoarding grain in a barn is about greed...

And our parable about *end* times is about *now* times, not about what happens then but about what happens now. Heard in this way, this parable about when life is done is asking a critical question as to how we live right now.

Again, this is not to water down what Jesus says. He wants us to take very seriously the question the parable is asking us.

Let's go back to Jesus and those Jesus impersonators behind the screen. If, in Dating Game style, one was to try to pick out the real Jesus a good question to ask might be about the question



Jesus would ask us: “If you were to ask of me only one question to help me consider my life, what would it be?”

- One says: “Did you love and hate the right people?”
- Another says: “Did you prove your virtue by being successful?”
 - We dismiss these possibilities easily.
- “Were you true to your conservative values?” and another says “*Were you true to your progressive ideals?*” And another says: “Did you take the right stand on issues?”
 - We dismiss these contestants easily too, though we do so with an embarrassed smile remembering a recent, self-righteous rant we went on.
- Another: “Did you join the right church?”
 - We easily dismiss this contestant too, even though if you are a member here, the answer is, “Yes.”
- Another: “Did you learn your theology and get it right?”
 - We are both convinced and relieved that is not the real Jesus, because we’ve tried and we still haven’t gotten our theology right.
- Another: “Have you verbally accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?”
 - Which is a tempting one for those whose lives truly have been made more graceful and full in doing so.

But, with our parable fresh in mind, we hear a contestant ask the question that suggests that maybe this is the real Jesus. Maybe this parable is hyperbolic and over-stresses the point as parables tend to do, but if we stay in the imagined world of this parable, we hear the only question that finally matters at the end of the day. We hear the contestant say, “Were you kind?”

- Were you kind to those who needed kindness?
- When you had the chance to be cruel, were you kind?
- Did you help when help was needed?
- Were you kind?

Oh dear! Even without being literal about end-times, that question is intimidating. The question Matthew’s Jesus leaves us with in his last sermon is that one. In the parable, the question is in the past tense so that we’ll ask it in the present one: “Are you kind?” Never mind the *unforgivable sin*, that is the *unavoidable question*.

If not the unforgivable sin, this is the unavoidable question.

It’s a question that should be asked of our culture right now. We live in a polarizing time when people are driven to take sides and then demonize those who are not with us but against us. In certain realms being unkind is almost celebrated if it leads to winning—whether in war, politics or snark attacks on social medial. This parable might be telling us, “We have a problem.” If the parable is right, God doesn’t much care about verbal declarations of faith, and is unimpressed by those who say they are Christian or follow Christ, and perhaps is irritated by those who claim to



love him while encouraging hate of others. What God cares about is if you live as Jesus lived. Are you kind?

If we stop caring about that question, maybe the deep-south preachers were right in part, that there comes a point when we do need to be a bit shaken, when if we have the chance to be kind, we are cruel.

That might be a problem.

