

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24, Psalm 100, Ephesians 1:15-23, Matthew 25:31-46

From the moment I read the first Harry Potter book, I have longed to reference it in a sermon, and today seems the perfect day to do so! If there is anyone out there unfamiliar with J.K. Rowling's 7 book series, I submit that it would be excellent hunker down for winter reading - regardless of your current age.

The Harry Potter series follows the lives of a number of young characters over the course of several years.

As the young wizards, both male and female arrive at the magic boarding school Hogwarts, they are assigned into a house, (think dormitories). This commissioning is done through the enchantment of a sorting hat. It is placed on a student's head and declares that they are to be the newest member of one of four houses each bearing the name of its founder.

Spoiler alert - the hero wizards (the characters we fall in love with and cheer for) are predominately sorted into the house of Gryffindor, whose mascot is the majestic lion. While the evil wizards (the antagonists who we revile and heckle) are sorted into the house of Slytherin, whose mascot is the sinister serpent.

Now, bear with me here a moment - To me, this sorting at Hogwarts seems a wee bit like today's gospel reading from Matthew. Jesus is sitting on the throne, all the nations are gathered before him and he separates the people (albeit without the aid of the magical hat) into those who are righteous and will experience eternal life and those who are evil and will experience eternal punishment.

We read that Jesus looked at those he directed toward his right hand and declared that they are "blessed by my Father" and will inherit the kingdom that God has prepared for them.

I imagine, if one was fortunate enough to be on that side of the throne, one would have felt quite happy. Perhaps they even begin recounting in their heads all the worthy acts they carried out throughout their lifetime - "I attended worship services regularly, I contributed financially to charities, I shared my crops with my neighbor during the famine.

However, based on Jesus' explanation, that is NOT why they were sorted the way they were. Jesus goes on to tell them they visited him in prison, clothed him, quenched his thirst, fed, welcomed and cared for him.

This explanation causes some confusion - they do not recall ever seeing him hungry or naked, in prison, or thirsty. Possibly with a bit of trepidation (cuz really, who wants to point out they don't belong in the favored group?) they ask him "when did we do this?"

He answers - "when you did any of these things to the least members of my family, you did it to me."

Meanwhile, on the left side of the throne we have those who have been told by Jesus "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels!"

But surely some of them must be thinking there has been a mistake - "I never committed any crimes, I attended worship services just like my neighbor over there on the right side of the throne. Why I even gave more money to charity than she did! Why am I over here and she is over there?"

Jesus goes on to explain "I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, I was sick and in prison and you did not visit me."

They object - "what are you talking about? When did we ever see you thirsty or hungry or naked or in prison, and we did not take care of you?"

Jesus replies in typical Matthean language - "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." And they are sent away.

Just like Rowling's books this gospel reading contains a lesson, but it may not be the one we first thought.

It seemed so clear when Harry first had the sorting hat placed on his head - that the house makes the wizard, but he and in turn, we the readers, later discovers the value of the wizard has nothing to do with their house, and everything to do with their character.

Pastor Lindsay Armstrong<sup>1</sup> warns us against missing the message of today's reading. She worries that those of us preaching will emphasize the wrong thing. That if we dwell on the humanitarian acts on behalf of the marginalized it will lead our listeners to falsely believe that we will be rewarded for simply undertaking charitable acts. As if this list Jesus gives is exhaustive and we need to treat it like our "honey do" list and check off each one as we complete it.

She explains that in the reading "the righteous are surprised to realize they had cared for the King of creation; evidently, they simply shared who they were and what they had freely, without calculation or expectation."<sup>2</sup> Equally those condemned to eternal fire are "shocked that they missed opportunities to show love to the King."<sup>3</sup>

Armstrong points out that throughout his lifetime Jesus shared "a natural overflowing of love, not calculated efforts designed to project a certain image."<sup>4</sup>

The task before us then is not to simply increase our acts of altruism, it is to learn to love our neighbor. But how do we do that?

Trappist monk and theologian Thomas Merton advises: "If I am to love my brother, I must somehow enter deep into the mystery of God's love for him..."

The truth I must love in my brother is God himself, living in him. I must seek the life of the Spirit of God breathing in him. And I can only discern and follow that mysterious life by the action of the same Holy Spirit living and acting in the depths of my own heart."<sup>5</sup>

The caution of today's gospel is not that we will be rewarded if we commit acts of benevolence and punished if we fail to. We are being invited yet again to love our sisters and brothers; those it is easy to love along with those that require work on our part even to tolerate. We are instructed that if we truly love God, we must also love all God's creation so deeply that it becomes impossible to fail to act when we see need in the world. And it becomes unfathomable to overlook our loved ones in need.

Today and every day let us look for the Spirit of God in each person we see and may we listen to the Spirit of God living in the depths of our own hearts. Amen.

<sup>1</sup> Rev. Lindsay P Armstrong, New Church Development Commission, Presbytery of Georgia, Atlanta, Georgia

<sup>2-4</sup> Lindsay Armstrong Feasting on the Word, Year A, volume 4. p. 570

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Merton essay "Love" from Called to Community: The Life Jesus Wants for His People. p.152