



25 November 2023

**'Christ among the Scraps' after Jan Richardson(Matthew 25.31-46)**

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Today's reflection is scraps of stories woven around the gospel narrative, a collage of sorts to make sense of this story. Notice what takes your attention.

Richard Rohr recounts something that arrested him near his home. He says:

there is a sidewalk where the homeless often sit against the wall to catch the morning sun. A few days ago, I saw new graffiti chalked clearly on the pavement. It touched me so profoundly that I immediately went home and wrote it in my journal. It said, "I watch how foolishly man guards his nothing, thereby keeping us out. Truly God is hated here." I can only guess at what kind of person wrote such wisdom, but I heard a paraphrase of Jesus in mind: "The people of the sidewalk might well be at the Centre, and the people in their houses might well be on the circumference" (Luke 13:30; Mark 10:31; Matt. 19:30; 20:16). Now I can probably assume that this street person is not formally educated in theology or trained in contemplative spirituality. Yet from the edges, this person recognised the false nature of our self-image and yet the clear sense of being included and excluded? This street person has both edges and essence and also knows exactly who God is!<sup>1</sup>

Now that's an angle on the gospel "I watch how foolishly man guards his nothing, thereby keeping us out. Truly God is hated here." And I hear Jesus' words reminding me that I simply don't know when I will encounter the face of Christ next, but most probably on the edges: thus making nearly all ground holy ground. And in the end, maybe that is precisely what Jesus' words are meant to do. The Gospel lesson speaks of a final judgment where 'goats' and 'sheep' are separated one from another. I know this. And yet, I find it most helpful to hear this as encouragement even now to see and experience and respond to this world in new ways.<sup>2</sup>

Israeli filmmaker Hadar Morag tells a stark personal story which speaks into our hurting world today, not only in Gaza, but here too, and again powerfully highlights Jesus' words for me. She says:

When my grandmother arrived here in Israel, after the Holocaust, the Jewish Agency promised her a house. She had nothing, her entire family was exterminated. She waited for a long time in a tent, in an extremely precarious situation. They then took her to Ajami, in Jaffa, to a beautiful beach house. She saw that on the table there were still the dishes of the Arabs who lived there and who had been kicked away. So she went back to the agency and said, take me back to the tent, I will never do to anyone else what was done to me. This is my

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<sup>1</sup>in Richard Rohr *What the Mystics Know*, Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, 2015

<sup>2</sup> <https://dancingwiththeword.com/seeing-the-face-of-jesus/>

legacy, but not everyone made that choice. How could we have become what we opposed? That's the big question.<sup>3</sup>

Have we, 'become what we opposed'?

Today's parable was the inspiration for one of Tolstoy's most popular stories, "Where Love is, God is."

An old man called Martin labours away at repairing shoes in a basement shop. Through its window he can see the legs of every one passing by. He can tell who it is by their shoes, most of which he has repaired at some time or other. The death of his wife and child has left him a bitter man, but when his best friend gives him a New Testament, the old man undergoes a change of heart.

One night Martin has a dream in which the Lord tells him that the next day he will come by and so all day he keeps looking expectantly out the window when he hears someone approaching. All he sees however are the usual passers by plus, a sidewalk sweeper suffering from the cold weather; an old woman berating a boy for trying to steal her apple; and a thinly clad young mother with a hungry baby. Martin helps each of them; but that night he is disappointed that the Lord did not show up. Then, of course, comes the revelation and Martin discovers the meaning of the words in Jesus' parable, "as you did it to the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me..."<sup>4</sup>

In a piece entitled *Christ Among the Scraps* © Jan L. Richardson weaves a striking narrative of creating a collage from discarded scraps as she reflected on this week's gospel reading. She says:

I played with the painted pieces, picking up, setting aside. I chose scraps that I had tried to use in earlier collages. I chose pieces from which I had previously cut shapes. I chose papers that I'd experimented with as I tried different colours or marking techniques. I chose from the leavings, the left behind. I dug my hands deep into the pile, hitting the bottom of the stack, turning over layers that hadn't seen the light of day in months. Sorting. Sifting. Choosing.

I thought about this passage, she continues, in which Jesus speaks of sorting and of sifting, how he describes a day when he will confront us with the choosing we have done: what we embraced, what we rejected. What we failed even to notice. He speaks of those who recognize him and minister to him, and those who don't. This text from Matthew lies at the deepest core of our call as followers of Christ. And it is, perhaps, the one that most fiercely challenges us, that stretches us the farthest.

When was it that we saw you?

I turn the scraps over in my hands, she says. Sorting, choosing. Finding the pattern. I think of how my deepest regrets—what few I allow myself—are most often attached to occasions when I didn't see. Didn't know how to see, didn't yet have the eyes for seeing. The realisation of it—the dawning knowledge of where my vision was lacking—is itself a kind of

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2023/11/3/2203415/--When-my-grandmother-arrived-here-in-Israel> accessed 18 November 2023

<sup>4</sup> <https://readthespirit.com/visual-parables/martin-cobbler-1977/> accessed 15 November 2023

punishment. But an invitation, too. To learn to look more closely. To take in what I have rushed past.

When was it that we saw you?



A face begins to take shape from the scraps. .. I look into these eyes and wonder what passage they offer. One eye, the crimson, was left over from the collage that I did for my [reflection on John 9.1-41](#) during Lent, says Richardson. Jesus spat on the ground, John tells us, and made mud, and placed it on a man's unseeing eyes. He told the man to go wash in the pool of Siloam, whose name means Sent. The sent man saw. And he recognised the one who sent him. Jesus tells him that he has come so that those who do not see may see.

When was it that we saw you?

She resumes, I begin to glue the pieces that I have chosen from the scraps. I find myself thinking of a talk I recently heard in which the speaker seemed to think that evangelism is something that involves our taking Jesus to places he hasn't already been. And I pray for eyes to see the ways that Christ already inhabits every place. How there is no place it hasn't already occurred to him to visit, no space in which he isn't already working to make a home, no person through whom he might not startle me with the blazing of his presence.

When was it that we saw you?

By his words in Matthew 25, Jesus assures us that our greatest sin lies not in having the wrong theology or refusing to believe as others would have us believe or failing to take him to a place he has never gone. Our sin lies in neglecting to recognize and respond to him where he already is.

Jesus gets awfully specific in telling us where we can find him. Each of the habitations he lists here is marked by lack: lack of food, lack of water, lack of hospitality, lack of clothing, lack of health, lack of freedom. Christ chooses these places, inhabits these spaces, waits for us to show up. Waits, too, for us to recognize those places in ourselves. He knows that if we haven't recognised the poverty within our own souls, and how he dwells there, it's hard to see him and serve him in others without being patronising.

When was it that we saw you?

This [weekend] is the last in Ordinary Time. Christ the King, the liturgical calendar tells us. As we prepare to cross the threshold into Advent, I wonder what Christ, this sovereign who came in such a ragged, radical guise, has in store for the season to come. How he'll show up. Where he'll invite me to see him.

Richardson says, I gaze at this unexpected face that gazes back at me. **Christ among the Scraps**, I'll call it. Making his home.

When was it that we saw you?

That's question enough for this week. <sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Christ Among the Scraps © Jan L. Richardson <https://paintedprayerbook.com/2008/11/19/christ-among-the-scraps/>