

## **Seeing the Unseen (Matthew 25:31-46)**

In Edwin Abbott's fascinating 1864 novella *Flatland*, characters are all shapes. A sphere from a three-dimensional world called *Spaceland* descends to the two-dimensional world of *Flatland*. In Flatland, the world consists of lines and flat shapes. So, for example, if a triangle turns to the side, the other inhabitants of Flatland see it as a line.

You can imagine the donnybrook in the two-dimensional realm of Flatland when the enigmatic Sphere shows up on the scene, a being from the third dimension! The folks of Flatland are a straightforward bunch, living in a world of length and width, with nary a notion of height or depth. To them, the world is a flat canvas.

So, 'up' and 'down' are foreign concepts in this pancake universe; they're as alien as the idea of a square circle or a good driver

from Ohio. So, when Mr. Sphere pays a visit, cruising through their flat existence, he looks like a strange circle that magically expands and contracts. The Flatlanders lose their minds. They can't fathom his true spherical glory. He's a mystery. He looks like a circle to their eyes. But inexplicably, he changes in size as he travels through their world. It produces a giant brain cramp for the two-dimensional denizens.

The hero of the story is a Flatlander named "The Square." At first, like all the rest of the inhabitants of his world, the Square can only experience the Sphere with a mind his world has formed to see two dimensions. But the Sphere offers him the chance of a lifetime: he takes the Square to Spaceland.

Pulled out of his flat existence, Square gets a cosmic noogie from the mysterious Sphere. Picture it: Square's cruising along in his two-D life, and then — Bam! — he's hoisted into the dizzying realm of Spaceland. It's like he's been near-sighted and squinty his whole life, and someone just slapped a pair of 3D glasses on

his face. Suddenly, there's this whole 'height' thing he's never even dreamed of. He **sees** things—real, solid, 3D things—including Mr. Sphere, the tour guide. It's like he's been watching life on a crummy motel TV with rabbit ears and Bakelite dials and suddenly gets a glimpse of reality in 8K.

From up there, Flatland is just a sheet of paper, and its people are scurrying around like ants who've lost their picnic. It's a real epiphany for Square. He gets it now: there's more out there than his flat world. But, oh, the price of seeing beyond the veil!

When he gets dropped back into Flatland and starts flapping his gums about 3D, they treat him like he's got an elbow growing out of his forehead. His grand ideas earn him nothing but cold stares and a one-way ticket to the joint. It's a real gut punch, showing just how tough it is to drop truth bombs on folks who aren't ready to hear them.

Seeing stuff other people can't see can get you in hot water with the big shots who run the world.

Did that ever happen to you? I don't mean being mistaken for the bass player in a garage band, or thinking there's no difference between Coke and Pepsi, or finding out that the "America" some people want to make "great again" was a world where the folks who look like me ran everything and everybody else was forced to readjust their lives every time someone like me walked into the room.

I mean, you picture the world one way, and it turns out different—and not just like an adjustably small amount of different ... but big, 180-degree, totally-opposite-of-what-you-were-thinking different?

Like everything you thought you knew turns out to be—if not completely wrong, then certainly off by more than a few clicks.

Like that perfectly fetching haircut you had in your high school yearbook was a tribute to your timeless fashion sense—a look that you figured would remain in vogue in perpetuity? And then your kids come along and tell you that you looked more like Shaggy running out of a broom closet in *Scooby Doo and The Tar Monster* than Fred driving the Mystery Machine with Daphne batting her eyes and hanging on his every word.

Or you're a kid, and you go to Baskin Robbins, and they have ice cream ... with bubble gum in it—and you think, "This is definitely the pinnacle of gustatory delight?" It's got ice cream ... **and** bubble gum? Come on. That's like the 1992 Olympic Dream Team of food for a kid. Then you grow up, and it becomes clear that there are perhaps more sophisticated ice cream options, and you can't figure out how you ever thought bubble gum ice cream was a plausible alternative for consumption by anything more sophisticated than a goat.

Or you grew up thinking that government service was at least nominally about “service,” and then along comes this merry band of self-dealing yahoos, and you wonder, “How could I have been so utterly mistaken?”

You were pretty sure the world worked one way, only to find out later that it worked completely differently.

And it’s not just with haircuts, ice cream, and naïve views of government either. People often have the same experience of God. They imagine God as huge ... and powerful ... and “out there”—enjoying long bouts of being prayed and sung to and surrounded by things like majesty and awe.

And while I suspect God is to be found in those things, I now believe there’s more.

When I go to Mexico, we usually stop at the Cathedral downtown. It was built in the sixteenth century. It’s got gold all over the

place. High ceilings. Beautiful statuary. Lots of polished wood. Pretty amazing.

If I were to imagine meeting God, it would look something like that. Standing before God on judgment day, I picture lots of awe and majesty, plenty of gold and high ceilings. When I hear about “Jesus coming in his glory,” that’s the kind of thing I see in my mind. Lots of trumpets, and light, and strange-looking beasts. An enormous gilded throne befitting God’s glory.

But in this parable, Matthew has a slightly different view of what the glory of God will look like. There’s a throne in Matthew’s version—but he doesn’t make much of it, apart from calling it the “throne of his glory.”

And that’s a little confusing because I have a pretty good sense of what “glory” looks like. But Jesus’ idea of glory, apparently, looks very different from my own.

What do I mean?

In the Gospel of Matthew, this particular parable of the sheep and the goats is actually more like an apocalyptic vision than a parable .... It is Jesus' last formal teaching to the disciples before the wheels of injustice start grinding. Matthew follows this parable by saying:

*When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, 'You know that after two days, the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.' Then, the chief priests and the elders of the people gathered in the palace of the high priest, who was called Caiaphas, and they conspired to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him.*

All of which is to say, according to Matthew's timeline, Jesus tells this parable of the sheep and the goats in which he's seated on the "throne of glory," just a matter of a couple of days before he's

going to ascend to glory ... on the cross—which, if we're being honest, had very little to do with trumpets or gold or bright light. Indeed, in the middle of Jesus' glorification on a cross made not of gold but of wood, all the lights went **out**—the sun went dark.

So, maybe the idea of the Son of Man coming in glory has less to do with an apocalyptic blockbuster at some point way off in the future; maybe the glory of the Son of Man has more to do with God's determination in Jesus to live **among** us and know the lives **we** live. The incarnation—God becoming human—is the most profound act of empathy—God, literally, committing to live a life in our skin, to see the world through **our** eyes.

And if God does that for **us**, shouldn't our lives be an attempt to imitate that empathy for others, to see not just ourselves in the faces of the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the prisoner ... but the face of Jesus himself?

What has troubled me, perhaps as much as anything, about our current political moment is not just the lack of empathy among so many but the idea that empathy might be something anyone should even care about. For more years than anyone cares to recall, vast numbers of our neighbors have lived in fear of what the powers and principalities might do to them. Those who claim to follow Jesus—the one who identified with the very people threatened by the world we **currently** occupy—have a responsibility to see in those same vulnerable people the face of Jesus.

And that's the surprise of this parable: When Jesus shows up, it's definitely not what we expected. When the Son of Man comes in his glory, shouldn't the heavens be torn apart, and the sound of mighty winds fill the air—shouldn't God come among us with awe and majesty?

Alas, according to Matthew, when the Son of Man comes in glory, what we see are the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick, and

the prisoner—because that’s where Jesus has chosen to hang out. Indeed, if Matthew has it right, that’s who Jesus **is**—the one who endured the wrath of the state for the love of those under its power and threat.

I find it worth noting here that the basis upon which judgment is passed lacks a few things religious people generally trot out as the kind of stuff God’s most concerned about.

Like what?

What does Jesus **not** mention as determinative conditions upon which God will pass final judgment?

The usuals. You know, sexual peccadilloes, murder, stealing, rooting for the St. Louis Cardinals—the biggies.

Instead, Jesus says that we’ll be judged on how we treat those who aren’t in a position to look out for **themselves**. True

abomination to God is abusing or ignoring those who, because of their lack of resources, cannot protect, cannot take care of, cannot speak for themselves.

Jesus sounds like the prophet Amos, who announced God's anger hundreds of years before Jesus showed up on the scene:

*I will not revoke the punishment; because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals—they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way (Amos 2:6b–7a).*

Why does God identify so strongly with these, the powerless?

Well, for one thing, God created us ... **all** of us. And afterward, God paused to consider the fine craftsmanship of God's hands. Apparently, God was heard to say, "That's pretty dang good! No ... Yeah, that's excellent!"

So, it stands to reason that God might take more than a little exception to watching those whom God has so lovingly called forth into existence have their dignity trampled. Their lives are threatened, either by those who actively seek to exploit the defenseless or those who commit their violence through neglect. God has ***always*** seen those who remain invisible, unseen to so many.

Moreover, God identifies with the dismissed and downtrodden because of Jesus. Remember, this parable is told just a couple of days before Jesus' death. Jesus, who has challenged the Roman Empire on behalf of the powerless, will soon take on powerlessness in its ultimate form by surrendering himself into the hands of the folks who will throw him in jail and hang him out to dry just for seeing something nobody else can see.

But it's not just ***something*** nobody else can see that gets Jesus sideways with the folks on top. What really gets him in trouble is

that he sees **someone** nobody else can see—or perhaps, better, he sees a whole world of **someones**. And maybe the problem isn't that the rest of the world can't see but that they **refuse** to see. And Jesus finds himself in hot water because he can't shut up about how God wants the world remade just so that they can finally know what it feels like to be seen.

The potential pitfall of this parable, however, as Stanley Hauerwas points out, is that it “seduces [us] into believing that we are working to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, care for the sick and those in prison without knowing anyone who is hungry, naked, thirsty, a stranger, sick, or in prison” (Stanley Hauerwas, Matthew, 212).

In other words, it may be that we need to consider again what the kinds of work Jesus is calling us to might **look** like. The parable of the sheep and the goats emphasizes our work of mercy among the powerless, not so that we might secure for ourselves

some kind of favor from God that would otherwise be **withheld** from us, but because we long to know Jesus.

That is to say, I take it that the meaning of this parable is something like, “If you want to know Jesus at all, then you better get out and get to know those who are on the margins, those it’s too easy to look past, to forget, those who’ve stumbled—or in many cases, just been kicked—so far off the path that they’re not even sure there **is** a path anymore. Because out there on the edge of society isn’t just **where** Jesus is, it’s **who** he is. We’d better get some practice seeing the unseen.”

It’s easy to think of God as distant, as residing “out there” somewhere—surrounded by the hosts of heaven, removed from the muck and grime, the disappointment and desperation that so often surrounds us. But the very people it’s so easy to ignore, the people who always seem to get the short end of the policy stick when it comes to our politics, who cry out to be heard, the people

who struggle to be seen ... if we're ever truly to find Jesus, it will be among ***them***.

It's not what we expected ... but with the world as it is, it's definitely what we need.

—Amen.