

The nations on Judgment Day: Matthew 25:31-46

by [James E. Brenneman](#) in the [November 18, 2008](#) issue

Our eternal destinies hang on two phrases: “I was a stranger and you took me in” and “I was a stranger and you did not welcome me.” Jesus gives us two options when relating to strangers: we can welcome them into our lives or not. The Matthew 25 parable is about nations, not individuals. Come Judgment Day, the text argues, “all the nations of the world will be gathered together” before the Son of Man. The scene is that of a world court with Jesus the chief justice sitting in judgment. Presumably Russia, China, Japan and the United States are there alongside other nations great and small.

Jesus uses the image of a shepherd-king dividing herds of sheep and goats: the goats (guilty and “cursed”) are on the left, the sheep (not guilty and “blessed”) are on the right. The criterion for judging is simple: I was hungry, thirsty, a stranger and sick and you gave me food and drink and welcomed me—or you did nothing. Both the sheep-nations and the goat-nations ask, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick or in prison?” The shepherd-king replies, “As you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

On that day, when God sorts out who was for God and who was against God, how we treated the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick, the prisoners and the strangers in our midst will be the only thing that matters.

Izaete Romao Afujo, a little girl from the slums of Recife, Brazil, was the fifth of eight children. Her mother was an alcoholic and her father worked odd jobs. Izaete worked too, as the maid for a rich family, and she washed clothes, scrubbed floors and cooked meals. When she returned home, her mother would beat her. One day a neighbor invited Izaete’s mother to attend a nearby Mennonite Church, where she was welcomed and loved. Within weeks, Jesus changed her life. Izaete too became involved in church and eventually went to college, became a pastor and returned to minister to those in the slums where she grew up. She is a pastor, she says, because someone cared enough about her to welcome and accept her: a stranger, an outsider, a kid from the slums.

Martin Luther King Jr. once said, “Any religion which professes to be concerned with the souls of people, but is not concerned with the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that cripple them—such a religion is a dry-as-dust religion.”

The religion of the Bible is anything but a “dry-as-dust” religion. The Old Testament warns against depriving a “resident alien” or foreigner of his or her human rights—that is, of justice. Furthermore, God watches over the foreigners in Israel’s midst. Every third year the entire tithe is to be allotted to the priests and to the resident aliens. And at the end of time when the divine real estate is parceled out among God’s people, a portion is to be set aside for the resident alien as an inheritance of God (Deut. 24:17, 14:28-29; Ezek. 47:22-23).

No wonder Jesus makes hospitality central to his view of ultimate salvation. Jesus practiced the Torah and was the fulfillment of Torah law. In fact, he blurs the doctrinal lines about the nature of God’s incarnation. Christ says that whoever entertains the lowliest outsider, the stranger, the castaway, the newcomer, the other, by direct extension also entertains Jesus himself. To be honest, I couldn’t get away with making such an audacious and unorthodox christological claim had Jesus himself not said, “As you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

When we show true Christian hospitality we let people know that someone cares about them, that God still loves them. As we introduce them to Christ, we ourselves are introduced in new and fresh ways to Christ.

From one perspective, the text invites us to rebel against the status quo of fear that keeps us from relating to those who are different from us. In a season of thanksgiving in the most prosperous nation in the world, what would it mean to invite strangers into our homes for a home-cooked meal? Perhaps different households could bring china place settings and tablecloths from home to church social halls for a common meal. Then they could go out “in the highways and byways” (Luke 14) and invite a new immigrant family, Muslim neighbors or a prisoner’s family for dinner.

Christ’s message of hospitality to the strangers among us is crucial to our national health. Jesus is fundamentally interested in systemic institutional commitment to the stranger, and he commands whole nations to treat those on the margins of life with dignity and love. How we as a nation help those who are poor, infirm, imprisoned

and otherwise estranged determines what our ultimate judgment will be.

In Revelation 3:20 Jesus is depicted standing and knocking at the door of the church. Most of us have no problem opening the door to Christ. But when the person at the door is an undocumented immigrant, an ex-convict or a stranger, what should we do? Do we ignore the knocking and hope the person will go away? Open the door and tell him or her to go away? Or open the door and ask the stranger in to share our lives?