

“Is That Your Final Answer?”

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Matthew 25: 31-46

Today is the end of the Christian liturgical year. Specifically, for those who pay attention to these things, the end of year A of the lectionary cycle. Next week, is the first Sunday in Advent, a new church year. In today’s lesson, Jesus is explaining to the people how it will be at the end of the age. Listen for and hear God’s word to us in these words of scripture.

Matthew 25: 31-46

Over the past several years, there has been a trend appearing in the television shows we have seen. At first it seemed rather benign. It pushed the long standing game shows to the max. This trend escalated with the show, “Who Wants to be a Millionaire?” There then came a rash of wannabes. These updated versions of the old desire to get-rich-quick often appear harmless– maybe even fun. But they are, in fact, yet another sign that our society is declining– some would even say decaying.

“Who Wants to be a Millionaire” evolved into “Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire” on one network, and to “Greed” on another. And then we have all the “Survivor” type shows where lies and deceit are the only ways to win the game. And don’t get me started on the talk show genre like Jerry Springer, where the lowest standards of human behavior are paraded out for our amusement?

By now, you’re probably wondering where this sermon is going. After all, this is the Sunday before Thanksgiving. Sue should be talking about Pilgrims and turkeys and football games; about family and friends gathered around a heavily laden holiday table. She should be talking about giving thanks to God for all our blessings. She should be talking about the abundant harvest, of pumpkin and apple pies. But that’s not where the text is going. That’s not where our scripture is focused.

In today’s lesson, Jesus is talking about the end of days. He’s reminding us that there will be an accounting for our actions and behaviors; there will be questions to be asked and answered. And our responses will make all the difference. “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels, with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.” And we will be asked questions. We will have to tell when we gave food to the hungry, clothes to the naked, housing to the homeless. What will our answers be? What standards have been those we have chosen to live by?

During this season of Thanksgiving, what have we chosen to do with our lives? What have been our goals and aspirations? Have we been trying to save ourselves by building bigger barns to store our accumulated wealth? Jesus says: “For what good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?”

The bumper sticker that reads: *He who dies with the most toys wins*. Have you seen those? Well, he who dies with the most toys wins nothing according to Jesus. We won't gain anything by building bigger barns— we're called to lay up treasures in heaven—not here by winning the lottery, playing the slots, or being on a game show.

In the movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*, Mr. Potter thought that George Bailey was a loser—someone who won nothing. But, we all know that when George Bailey was willing to give up his life, his friends all came to repay him for all the good he'd done, and the blessings he extended to others. Being good might not be glamorous, but it is its own reward. George Bailey didn't build bigger barns, he laid up treasures in heaven and in the hearts of his friends. He saw others when they were hungry, or thirsty, and he gave them aid.

Perspective—balance— keeping our priorities clear— that's what we need to do. As long as we only think of these games as entertainment— they're relatively harmless. But, if we actually begin to put our faith, our hopes, our dreams on them— then we are worshipping the wrong gods. What does it do for us to gain the whole world and yet lose our souls?

Jesus does ask us some very difficult questions. Instead of making the Christian way of life easy— Jesus makes us ask ourselves some very difficult questions.

Not long ago, I was watching “*Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*” for the millionth time—those of you who are in either bible study or confirmation class with me will come to know that I love the special effects that Steven Spielberg uses to explain theology. Near the end of the movie, Indiana Jones has to get the Holy Grail in order to save his father's life. The bad guy says to him, “It is time to ask yourself what you believe.” Jones then has to pass three tests. The first is to be penitent, the second is to walk in the Word of God, and the third requires a leap of faith. Of course, Indiana Jones gets it right and saves his father; and the bad guy, who only wanted immortality and riches for himself—dies.

I want to close this morning by borrowing a bit from Regis Philbin and the “*Who Wants to be a Millionaire*” show. Each contestant gets three lifelines, in life I hope that God gives us many more lifelines than that.

**Lifeline One (50/50): Scripture.** When we want to have some wrong answers removed, scripture is where we start. The word of God gives us guidance, helping us to avoid bad choices and make good ones.

**Lifeline Two (Poll the audience): The Church.** We can poll the community of faith for support when we are facing the challenges of life. The Body of Christ is there for precisely that reason; to warn when danger lurks, and affirm when we're exercising our gifts.

Lifeline Three (Call a friend): Jesus. Jesus is our Lifeline Friend who models for us the right answers, and shows us how to live a greedless life.

Don't get me wrong, I like the Millionaire show— just like I like some of the game shows, to see if I get the answers right. But they are only games.

When all is said and done— it won't be Regis Philbin, but God, asking the final questions regarding the way we led our lives— the choices we've made—the things we've done. When we arrive at the pearly gates it will be God saying to us, "Is that your final answer?" And it will be our life actions as well as our answers that will determine our final reward.

That's what we should be thankful for this Thanksgiving. The God who loved us into this world, loved us enough to give us family, friends, abilities, a working brain and feeling heart—that God loves us still. In fact, that God loved us so much to send his son, Jesus, to bring us back into the family of God. Isn't that something to be thankful for?

Thanks be to God. Amen.