

**Circle of Mercy Sermon**  
**Matthew 25:31-46**  
**11/26/17**

**“Multiple Exposures”**  
**by Missy Harris**

In an article I read this week, Barbara Lundblad described this text from Matthew as a double exposure photograph. Folks under the age of twenty (give or take a few years) may not know what a double exposure is. For those of you who do, you'll recall that when pictures were made using actual film, sometimes – if you didn't know if the film had been used or not – you might end up using one roll of film twice, in two very different settings.

This meant that, later, when you got your film developed, you would discover that your pictures from the snowstorm in the winter mysteriously included pictures from your trip to the beach in the summer – the summer pictures superimposed on top of the winter ones. There you would be putting the scarf around Frosty's neck, right next to yourself, several months later, putting the final touches on your elaborate sandcastle in the very same photo. Or your high school graduation photos might also include beautiful (or awkward and intense) pictures of your family gathered around the Thanksgiving Table.

Photographers sometimes use this process intentionally, for artistic purposes. But whether intentional or by total accident, you would end up seeing images from two very distinct moments in time, printed in the same photo. Sometimes this experience of double exposure elicited a good laugh at the ridiculousness of the disparate images held in one frame. Other times I remember it eliciting a sense of sadness, at the loss of an anticipated single image that held deep significance.

In the digital age, we don't get these surprises like we did back when we had to take our film to CVS, returning pick it up a week after we dropped it off there to be developed. Digital photography and software like Photoshop have enabled us to do such things more easily, with varying degrees of expertise, and with a markedly lower likelihood of unexpected outcomes – whether joyful or full of regret. We can simply take a picture, view it, and either erase or save it in real time.

Lundblad used this metaphor of double exposure to highlight how Jesus had already embodied what he was asking his followers to do. He offered a clear picture of what it looks like to be awake and to be prepared to use what has already been given to each of us. “He has fed hungry people on the hillside. He has welcomed tax collectors, sinners and other strangers to his meals. We could go verse by verse through this Gospel and find one clue after another pointing to Jesus’ version of righteousness and kingdom living. His first teaching overlaps his last teaching. Judgment day intersects with present hour. We live in a double exposed photograph in which the last day and the present day are part of the same picture. . . Judgment is happening all the time, and righteousness is happening all the time, and Jesus is with us all the time.”<sup>1</sup> Righteousness is not determined in one single moment with a reward at the end of time, rather it is an invitation that is ongoing – that invites us into life. Each moment is stamped with the past and the present – what we have known and what we have the opportunity to respond to now – knowing what we know, that we didn’t know before.

This metaphor of a double exposure connected with my own reading of Matthew 25, as I have multiple experiences of this particular text. The earliest, from the faith of my childhood, focused on the judgment portion of the text where you do these things in order to be on the right side at the end of your life. Another came from when I was in college and visited the Open Door Community for the first time, where I encountered people committed to living out these verses – not out of fear of eternal punishment, but out of a sense of mission – being called to discipleship, to engage in the opportunity to serve Christ himself in the here and now.

Two images from that first visit to the Open Door community became embedded in my mind and spirit. The first was the headlights of our van fanning out over the rain soaked basketball court at the back of the house – mounds of wet cardboard and blankets sheltering bodies huddled beneath them, trying to stay dry and warm – the first time I had ever taken in such a scene. The second was a print of Fritz Eichenberg’s *Christ of the Breadlines* – an image that urged me to see Jesus in the faces of folks who filed through the breakfast line that morning. I left the Open Door after that first weekend,

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<sup>1</sup> Lundblad, Barbara K., “Matthew 25:31-46 Homiletical Perspective” in *Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew, Volume 2*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 267-271.

disturbed and disoriented, in the best sense of those two words, though it felt like anything but good news as it was happening.

When I look back at these experiences, there were more nuances in each of them than I recognized at the time. For example, in the earlier part of my life, while there was an explicitly named focus on the judgment and being on the right side at the end of my life, I also watched the people around me quietly embodying what Jesus described in these verses – feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and the prisoner. However, the doing was not the main idea. In fact, it rarely got lifted up, but it was certainly there.

And, while it took me longer than I would like to admit to realize it, after visiting the Open Door I came to understand that I didn't have to throw everything I had known and believed prior to that out the window. One didn't have to be completely wrong, in order for the other to be right for me in another moment of my life. Both experiences grounded me both in a sense of service and a sense of connection with community. Both came from a deep conviction that being a follower of Jesus is intimately tied to how we treat the people around us. I had come to see this and know this in both places in different ways, whether I (or the people I was learning from) knew it or not. I began to see this when I released myself (or more accurately others helped me release myself) from seeing them as two mutually exclusive ways of being in the world.

What I came to understand was that what I witnessed and experienced in each of these parts of my life was part of a bigger, more complex picture of my own faith journey, one that continues to unfold, one that continues to challenge me with its nuances and complexities, one that continues to defy being tied down by a simple explanation or set of rules to follow. Each distinct moment just happened to be superimposed upon the moments that preceded it.

One of the interesting things that happens in this section of Matthew 25 is that the sheep and the goats (those labeled righteous and the unrighteous) were equally *unaware* that their action/inaction toward the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick and the imprisoned person had anything to do with Jesus. They actually had more in common than they might have been willing to admit on their own.

When Jesus turned to the righteous at his right hand and said, “Come, you that are blessed . . . inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world,” because you have done these things to me, their response was, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” (Matthew 25:34-39) They had no idea.

The unrighteous at his left hand also had no idea that when they failed to meet the needs of the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick and the imprisoned that they had failed to meet the needs of Jesus saying to him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?” (Matthew 25:44) They didn’t see the connection either.

Jesus wasn’t shaming either group. This is not a story that forces us into right behavior out of fear of the consequences of not following Jesus’ teaching. It would be counter to the core of Jesus’ message if we only read this text through a lens of fear. Fear is insidious. Fear immobilizes us. Fear limits us by convincing us that we live in the midst of scarcity, rather than abundance. Fear keeps us from living fully. Fear limits our capacity to follow Jesus. Time and time again, the Gospel story reminds us – “fear not.” Jesus was inviting all of them to live with deeper awareness and intention. Jesus wanted to expand their understanding of a life of discipleship and faithfulness, to remind them that the opportunities were ever present around them.

I got to thinking about Lundblad’s image of double exposure photographs, and I realized I wanted to add something to it. It really doesn’t stop with double exposure. I think it’s multiple exposures that we live with and are shaped by as we move through our days and through the different stages of our lives – superimposed one upon another, upon another, upon another.

There’s something about the digital age we live in that feeds that part of ourselves that believes we can construct perfection on our own, that we can solve the problems around us out of something brand new that has not even been imagined, where we Photoshop that one, just-right image – blotting out all else that shows imperfection, weakness, limitation – or simply the humility of admitting what we don’t know.

Yet, I find myself more and more longing for those unexpected moments of wonder and surprise – where images of members of my growing up youth group show up in the middle of my pictures of Baptist Youth Camp with our youth – because the two are connected; or when Bertha and Rhoda, Sunday School teachers from my childhood, show up in the photograph of the youth and Joyce and me talking with Wiley on the phone earlier this afternoon – because the two are connected; or when my grandmother shows up in the picture as I’m sitting with someone who is dying – because the two are connected; or where the picture of my mom starting a new job working with homeless families at the age of 68 and traveling to Lumberton with folks from the Latinx church in Cullowhee to do flood relief shows up right smack in the middle of the picture of COM folks visiting families at Stewart Detention Center – because the two are connected.

The truth is – it’s all part of my picture – the same picture. It’s complex and messy. It’s beautiful and tender. There’s not one perfect point I can point to and say that I’ve finally arrived once and for all at the pinnacle of what it means to meet and respond to Jesus in my daily life.

We all have the capacity and opportunity to keep growing and expanding in each day of our lives, in big and small ways. In the text we read tonight, people who were meeting the needs of the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick and the imprisoned didn’t even know they were encountering Jesus. And those who failed to meet and respond to those same needs, didn’t know that they had missed an opportunity to respond to him. Nevertheless, they still encountered Jesus.

There are people, places and experiences that brought every single one of us here. When I think about this community and the ways that you help me recognize and become aware, I come up with a long list, but I’ll name just a few:

I think about the Sermon on the Mount Group that has been meeting for over two years now – a group of folks in our Circle who meet each month to talk about the complexity of Jesus’ central teaching and how it shapes their lives, how it keeps working on them, layering the exposures. One story in particular stands out to me about BJ who has really let this text work on her in relation

to her neighbors, who differ from her politically, and shaped her interactions with them.

I think about the Immigration Group that has also been meeting monthly for nearly two years – finding ways to connect with immigrant neighbors, exploring and encouraging sanctuary, responding to community needs, and much more.

I think about Wiley Dobbs – who knows about each of you, asks about you by name. He knows which of our youth are having a hard time being away from home for the first time. When we talked on the phone on Wednesday, he asked to speak with Abby before we talked about anything else. He was wonderful in conversation with our youth this afternoon in Sunday School.

I think about those of us who have helped with retreats for the women at the Swannanoa Women's Prison and their children – creating a time and place for them to spend a day or overnight together – a rare thin for those in prison to experience. I think about the stories that Nancy and Mahan and others have shared from their work in the prison.

I think about all of you who gathered last week to sing with Buzz and Suzy.

I think about all that has been swirling around in the past two days alone as I've been finishing up this sermon – several of you springing into action to respond to and be present when unexpected needs arose in our midst.

These are just a few of the things that happen when we are together. There's more – much more – that's seen and unseen. You're doing it every day – as doctors, as parents, as nurses, as pastors, as friends, as co-workers, as peacemakers, as writers, as bosses, as musicians, as people of the Way. You're meeting Christ. Others are meeting Christ in you. We give and we receive. There are more people, places and experiences that will continue to shape us and take us where we can't even imagine ourselves going from this moment forward. All these moments of our lives offer us the opportunity to engage and respond and live fully. So let's keep layering the images in these photographs, trusting that Jesus has been with us, is with us, and will continue to be with us – not only when we recognize him but even when we' don't. Amen.