

Luke 21:5-19

When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stories and gifts dedicated to God, he said, "As for these things that you see, the day will come when not one stone will be left upon another, all will be thrown down." They asked him, "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place". And he said, "Beware that you are not led astray, for many will come in my name and say, "I am he!" and, "The time is near!" Do not go after them. "When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified, for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately." Then he said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues, and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven. "But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you, they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance, for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls."



Edvard Munch, *The Scream*, detail



Linda Post, *S. J. J.*, detail

'Gaining Soul'

But not a hair of you head will perish.
But by your endurance you will gain your soul.

Luke 21:19

The soul is that inward capacity in which the divine and human connect in a lifelong process of anchoring and maturing and enduring—enduring that will not flinch in the face of suffering.

Apocalyptic language dominates our gospel lesson for today. It is an odd sounding style of writing which attempts to address the end of earthly times as we know them. It mixes the reality of current events with the theological idea that both endings and beginnings are brought about by God. Christian thought adds the belief that Christ Jesus comes to help souls, who are coming unglued by fear, with his strengthening Presence and words of guiding wisdom. In his reflection on Jesus's comment to the crowd that challenged his teaching about the downfall of the temple, Rev. Lueking wrote (*ChristianCentury*): 'Jesus is no stranger' to the horrific forces still on the prowl in the world we know. Their terror, whether cosmic or personal is overcome by the assurance that he knows his own even the number of the hairs on their heads. He went to the cross to make that assurance trustworthy. He holds his own fast through the worst. It is not stoic determination that gets 'gain of soul' but faithful reliance on his promise of grace sufficient in weakness, a grace that works in everything for the gain of soul.'

In ancient China, the people wanted security against the barbaric hordes to the north, so they built the Great Wall. It was so high they believed no one could climb over it and so thought nothing could break it down. They settled back to enjoy their security. During the first hundred years of the wall's existence, China was invaded three times. Not once did the barbaric hordes break down the way to climb over it. Each time, they bribed a gatekeeper and then marched right through the gates. The Chinese were so busy relying on walls of stone they forgot to teach integrity to their children (*Homelitics*, Nov/Dec 8).

Tuesday's election marked the end of a divisive election campaign which effectively shattered the integrity of our nation's soul. In the apocalyptic parable of the sheep and goats from Matthew, Jesus taught his disciples how they could restore the integrity of the Jewish soul by building bridges of compassion and love instead of walls between people. 'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in. I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me. I was in prison and you came to visit me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' The King will reply, "I tell you the truth, what ever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.' Then he will say to those on his left, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink. I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me. I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.' They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?' He will reply, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me." Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.'

Jesus' sheep and goat parable inspired the early church to make a Christian list of 'works of mercy.' Seven of these works deal with physical needs: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, harboring the stranger, visiting the sick, ministering to prisoners and burying the dead. Seven others deal with spiritual needs: converting the sinner, instructing the ignorant, counseling the doubtful, comforting the sorrowful, bearing wrongs patiently, forgiving injuries, and praying for others. In his Daily Devotional entitled, 'From Generation to Generation' (Nov. 4), pastor Richard Floyd wrote: 'Faith is a multi-generational project. Each generation tells the next generation the great story of God's vast love. In that regard, our faith is not only something we have, but also something we get from others. I think back to the many people who helped me to have faith. Often it was not what they told me so much as who they were, a certain authenticity about them and the way they acted. I don't know if I ever consciously thought, "I want to be like that person" but that is the way it worked. So authentic faith is contagious, something you 'catch' from others. From generation to generation faithful witnesses live it out and pass it on.'

Here at First Church I am grateful for the ways in which we gain integrity of soul by engaging in Jesus' 'works of mercy'. This Saturday is our 'Turkey Trot to raise money for the West Bridgewater Food Pantry. Then on Sunday November 27 during coffee hour, 'Trades of Hope' will present our Howard Lecture. In the evening we have our Thanksgiving Service at St. Anne's. After Thanksgiving it is Christmas on the Green with breakfast and Farmer's Market. In December it's our Christmas Sharing tree and Howard lecture on prison reform.

Christ transforms us.

Once betrayed, now blessed.

Once a victim, now victorious.

Once conquered, now conquerors.

Once lost, now found.

Once imprisoned, now set free.

Once weak, now empowered.

Once, just for ourselves, now a blessing for others.