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Spiderman Stickers, Lollipops, and the Salvation of Our God

A sermon by the Rev. Canon Julia Mitchener
The Last Sunday after Pentecost – Year A

Eleven years ago, I got saved in the waiting room of the Emergency Department at Emory Midtown Hospital. No, not "saved" like that. And not saved the other way, either. It's true, I had driven myself to the hospital convinced that I was dying (Spoiler alert: I might be just a wee bit of a hypochondriac). My children—ages 4 and 2 at the time—my children and I had spent the afternoon enjoying the scarecrow exhibit at the botanical gardens and were on the Downtown Connector ready to head home to Macon when, all of a sudden, my heart starting pounding, my palms became so sweaty I could barely grasp the steering wheel, and my entire body went numb. Following the signs to the nearest hospital, I careened into the parking lot and shouted dramatically to the attendant, "I think I'm having some sort of major cardiac event!"

I wasn't. The first clue came when the triage nurse said to me cheerfully, "Honey, I wish my blood pressure when I'm lying on the beach was half as good as yours is under stress!" She then explained that they would need to run a few more tests before they could discharge me, but she was pretty sure that what I was experiencing was an anxiety attack, not a heart attack. It was going to be a while before a doctor could see me; it was Friday at 5 o'clock, after all, and there was a lot going on.

And so the wait began. The children quickly grew bored with the small stash of books and toys I had in my handbag. My son began acting out his superhero fantasies, leaping not from one tall building to another but, rather, across an entire row of vinyl covered chairs filled with people—again and again and again. My daughter made her way over to a door and was—I couldn't quite tell at first because I was still experiencing the blurry vision I had been sure indicated a stroke but had since decided might just be a detached retina—my daughter made her way over to a door and . . . was she licking it? Really? Yes. Yes, she was. My daughter was licking the door in a hospital!

It was then that the woman from across the room stood up. The woman who had been hunched over in her chair in the corner for more than an hour, swathed with blankets and surrounded by an assortment of bags, no one coming to take her blood pressure or offer her juice and crackers, no one really coming anywhere near her probably because of the way she smelled. This woman reached into one of her bags and rooted around until she pulled out a couple of things. She shuffled over to us with considerable effort and handed them to me: Spiderman stickers for the would be superhero and a lollipop for the door licker. "I got grandkids," the woman explained, then retreated back across the room. My children settled in with their treasures, and I was able to take a good deep breath for the first time since I had started falling apart out on the freeway.

Salvation often comes in unexpected forms—a lollipop or a couple of stickers, the unlikely kindness of a stranger. Salvation often comes in unexpected forms. Such is the testimony of this morning's gospel lesson. Such is the testimony of a lot of us here today, I'm willing to bet. People who have been trapped in what we were sure was a living hell only to find it a sanctuary of sorts. People like my mother, who after getting stuck in an ice storm in northern Alabama once, found herself taking shelter among a sketchy looking crowd at an establishment known as—I kid you not—the Booby Bungalow, only to discover that the patrons there were kind and gentle people who found her a tow truck and a place to spend the night. But that's a story for another day.

The story for this day—the story for today is a rather odd tale from the 25th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. Often referred to simply as "The Sheep and the Goats," a better name for it might be "The Great Surprise. Why? Well, because the characters in this story are so taken aback when they learn that Jesus himself has been in their midst and they did not know it. Did you catch that? Nobody in today's gospel knows that Jesus,

the author of their salvation, has been anywhere near them—not “the sheep,” the ones who obey the command to love God and their neighbor, and not “the goats,” either, the ones who forget this command or ignore it, or simply grow tired and take the day off, like all of us do from time to time. “Lord, when did we see you?” every one of them asks Jesus. To which, of course, the reply comes back: “Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

This is a surprise, though it should not be. You see, Matthew has spent his entire gospel describing a Messiah who, instead of showing up in the predictable places where you might expect to find the Son of God—in the inner sanctum of the Temple, the holiest of holies, cozying up to the high and mighty, cavorting with the professional religious folks—instead of showing us a Jesus like this, Matthew has shown us a Messiah who seems to prefer hanging out with tax collectors and prostitutes and taking a seat down at the far end of the table. *Blessed are the poor in spirit*, Matthew’s Jesus proclaims, clear as day. *Blessed are those who mourn*. *Blessed are those who are persecuted*.

Throughout his gospel, Matthew emphasizes that Jesus offers a very different path of salvation than the world does. Jesus’ way locates redemption in the deep, dark valleys of this universe and especially among the broken and frightened people who dwell there. People who, as the late Pope Francis once put it, are “close to the ground”: the poor, the sick, the imprisoned, the outcast, the oppressed. This, of course, goes against pretty much everything our society teaches us. If you want to enjoy “the good life,” conventional wisdom says, the thing to do is to hang out in the corridors of power, to cozy up with those who are popular, those who have money and influence and beauty and wit and charm. Jesus says the opposite, and it is jarring—at least it is for me. And yet somehow, in our heart of hearts, I suspect we know this to be true: While proximity to power and riches may offer their comforts, they are not what will ultimately save us. Those moments in life when we feel most whole, most healed, most redeemed, most embraced are not usually the moments when we are recognized by our peers for our brilliance or when we dominate others or bring home a huge bonus. Rather, our moments of true salvation are the moments when we give and receive mercy. The moments when we find ourselves so lost we have to get directions from the man panhandling on the street corner, the one everyone knows is crazy. The moments we are sure we are serving someone else, only to find that it is we ourselves who are being served. The moments when we stop sorting ourselves into different groups—sheep and goats, liberals and conservatives, old and young, you name it—the moments when we stop sorting ourselves into different groups long enough to recognize our common humanity. The moments like the great 20th century mystic Thomas Merton once described, writing:

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers . . . This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud. I have the immense joy of being human, a member of a race in which God became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now that I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are walking around shining like the sun.[1]

There is no way of telling people that they are walking around shining like the sun. Maybe not. But we can still accept their lollipops and their Spiderman stickers. We can offer whatever it is we ourselves have to give. We can sit down at table together and thus sit down with Christ. We can love and be loved and in so doing know the salvation of our God. Amen.

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[1] Merton, Thomas. *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander.* Doubleday, 1966.

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