
When They See Us: Casting a Queer of Color Gaze at Matthew 25:31–46

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Seeing the Least of These—Part I

Matthew 25:31–46 presents a vision of final judgment grounded in what is done—or left undone—for “the least of these.” The term “the least of these” is rendered in quotes throughout this article to signal the instability of the notion that the people and life circumstances that construct the category (“the least of these”) is universally clear and legible. Given the white supremacist, misogynistic, antiblack, xenophobic, capitalistic, cis-heteronormative, and trans-antagonistic world we live in, “the least of these” are conceived – socially, economically, and theologically—from perspectives of privilege. Feeding the hungry, hydrating the thirsty, welcoming the foreigner, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, and visiting the imprisoned are not simply acts of charity; they are, according to Jesus, encounters with Christ himself. Those who fail to act likewise fail to see Jesus in the suffering, marginalized, and dispossessed.

This article approaches the Gospel of Matthew generally and Matthew 25:31–46 specifically through Queer of Color Biblical Criticism (QoCBC), a hermeneutic and praxis based in queer of color critique that centers the lives, epistemologies, and liberative imaginations of queer people of color. QoCBC emerges from the intersecting legacies of queer theory, critical race studies, and minoritized biblical scholarship. Inspired by thinkers such as Roderick Ferguson (2004, 2012), José Esteban Muñoz (1999, 2009, 2020), bell hooks (1992), and the Combahee River Collective (1977). It interrogates both scripture and the systems of interpretation that exclude racialized and queer experiences. It insists that queer people of color are not only readers of sacred texts, but also subjects whose lives and struggles reveal truths that traditional hermeneutics too often miss or suppress.

Roderick A. Ferguson writes, “Queer of color analysis... interrogates social formations as the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class, with particular interest in how those formations correspond with and diverge from nationalist ideals and practices.”¹ In coalitional and genealogical solidarity with black

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and women of color feminisms, queer of color critique elaborates on intersectional discourses emerging from the radical politics of the 1970s, the activist and cultural productions of the 1980s, and the academic formations of the 1990s to add and foreground the multiple, simultaneous, and overlapping implications of sexuality (and the fluidity of sexualities) against and beyond the matrices of hegemonic oppression. Deployed by activists, organizers, intellectuals, artists, care workers and community members alike, queer of color critique builds an analytic for political world building. Combining cultural critique with biblical interpretation, queers of color emerge as readers of scripture and readers of religious politics of acceptance, heteronormative inclusion, and interpretive hypocrisies against which we fashion alternative worlds and futures.

With this lens, I argue that the Matthean Jesus’ expectations to “see” and serve “the least of these” is not a call to perform benevolent charity from a position of privilege, but instead it is an invitation to radical solidarity. “The least of these” are not peripheral to Christian discipleship—they are central. Jesus stands among those the church and society systematically refuse to see: queer youth of color, black transgender women, undocumented migrants, victims of the prison industrial complex, the economically oppressed and socially impoverished. To truly follow Jesus is to see them, not as

1. Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 149.

objects of pity, but as co-creators of a just and flourishing world. Through a queer of color gaze, Matthew 25 becomes not merely a judgment text, but a call to vision, to mutual recognition, and to actions that work to dismantle oppressive systems, rooted in shared liberation.

Jesus' vision throughout the Gospel as basis for a queer of color gaze

Throughout the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is consistently portrayed as seeing and responding to the marginalized. From the outset, his ministry is marked by vision that leads to action. In Matthew 5:1, Jesus “sees” the crowds and delivers the Sermon on the Mount, offering blessings to the poor in spirit, those who are mourning, those made to become meek, peacemaking, and persecuted—not as spiritual ideals but as social realities born of imperial oppression. The teachings that have been called “The Beatitudes” provide a list of lived oppressions for which the disciples should hold the people in high regard (*markarioi*). No one is ontologically poor in spirit, or people who mourn, or make peace, and so on. Jesus recognizes that those he is spotlighting are made to be in their situations because of the Roman Empire. The *markarioi* are visible and valued in God’s empire despite the earthly (Roman) empire rendering them invisible and unvaluable. Those with eyes to see recognize that twenty-first century examples of “the least of these” are made to be in their precarious life situations because of the Western/U.S. empire and in many cases, the church itself. Jesus sees these social conditions, and teaches the disciples to minister to them, respect them, and act on their behalf.

In Matthew 9:2, Jesus sees the faith of those who bring a paralyzed man and initiates both healing and forgiveness. When Jesus forgave the man’s sins, he was challenged and accused of blasphemy by some of the religious leaders. Jesus doubles down on his intervention not only by forgiving the man’s sins but telling him to rise and walk (take your mat and go home – Matt 9:6-7). When the people saw what Jesus had done, they were awestruck and glorified God, the one having given such authority to human beings (*ton theon ton donta exousian tou autēn tois anthropois* – 9:8). Note: the men brought the paralyzed man to Jesus as an act of faith. Jesus, upon seeing their faith, takes action. The religious authorities (scribes) challenge Jesus’ interventions of forgiving the sins and the healing of the paralyzed man. Jesus claps back at the powers, and the crowd, having seen what happened, glorified God who gives such authority to human beings. “Tois anthropois” is plural. The authority to intervene and restore to right standing is given to human beings by God. The queer of color gaze notes that Jesus is in solidarity with the men who acted on their faith and the crowds that glorify God as a result. They see their friend in need, they see Jesus, Jesus sees them. They see the potential for restoration, and that it is the divine authority given to human beings.

A hallmark of Jesus’ teachings to the disciples is through the tool of parables. In Matthew chapter 13 his students ask why Jesus always teaches in parables. Jesus responds:

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To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have it in abundance, but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. The reason I speak to them in parables is that ‘seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand’ ... But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it and to hear what you hear but did not hear it (Matt 13:11-13,16-17).

Some people are supposed to see, because seeing the plight of the oppressed is a divine optic, as is hearing the needs of the people and addressing them. Following Jesus, we are to interpret the people and their needs as holy.² Queer prophetic vision perceives that divine work must be done in spite of people having the capacity to understand but willfully choosing not to see the truth (cf. Isaiah 6:9-10). It involves seeing our way through from survival to thriving in spite of the various industrial complexes (prison, medical, religious, etc.) and cultural prejudices that are invested in our invisibility. While on the surface we say to our churches that “we are baptized too” and to the state that “we are human beings too,” we understand that we must construct our own channels of mutual aid and let Jesus sort out the rest in the last days. We do this work not only for ourselves and for the freedom and flourishing of our siblings called “the least of these” but we do it also for Marsha P. Johnson, Sylvia Rivera, Sojourner Truth, Bayard Rustin, and other queers of color and allies who fought for but never saw liberation (Matt 13:17). We look at each other to see our way through.

In Matthew 14 and 15, Jesus sees the crowds, has compassion, and commands the sharing of resources for their feeding. This compassionate gaze is previewed in Matthew 9:36 (*when Jesus saw*

2. Obery M. Hendricks Jr., *The Politics of Jesus: Rediscovering the True Revolutionary Teachings of Jesus and How They Have Been Corrupted* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2006).

the crowds he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd). Each act of seeing becomes a moment of divine recognition that calls forth human response. Although all four canonical gospels record the so-called feeding of the multitudes (Mark 6:31–49; Matt 14:13–21; Luke 9:12–17; John 6:1–14), only Mark and Matthew note that Jesus saw the crowds and had compassion (Mark 6:34; Matthew 14:14). Similarly, Jesus sees the crowd and has compassion in the feeding of the 4,000 (Mark 8:2–3; Matt 15:32). In these examples, Jesus, seeing that the crowds need healing and are hungry feeds them out of compassion. Jesus takes meager resources from the least among the crowd, gives thanks to God, and gives the resources to the disciples to distribute. I argue that the miracle happens in the sharing of resources by the disciples (cf. *For to those who have, more will be given, and it will be in abundance* Matt 13:12). When Jesus gives thanks to God, he still has five loaves and two fishes (Mark 6:38; Matt 14:17; Luke 9:13; John 6:9) and seven loaves and a few small fishes (Mark 8:5–7; Matt 15:34) respectively when he gives them to the disciples. Not only were the multitudes fed, but there were also leftovers to be gathered (“they took up the broken pieces”—Mark 8:8; Matt 15:37).

The second part of the great commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself (Matt 22:39; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27; John 13:34–35)” includes “the least of these.” The virtues of compassion, justice seeking, mutual care, and lifting the lowly are implicit in loving our neighbor as ourselves. In all four canonical gospels Jesus queers the notion that a neighbor is a social equal by his examples of breaking the cultural norms of proper relationships (including tax collectors, women, children, differently abled, sex workers, and others referred to as “sinners.”). Discipleship is demonstrated by this love (cf. John 13:35).

The narrative arc of the previous examples builds toward Matthew 25, where seeing—or the failure to see—is no longer incidental but eschatological. It is the metric of justice and a glimpse of God’s kingdom among us, and to come. Jesus has been modeling a divine-optic all along: seeing the crowds (Matt 5:1), seeing faith (Matt 9:2), seeing need (Matt 14:14; 15:32), and insisting that his disciples do the same. The christological expectation in Matthew 25 to see “the least of these” is not new—it is the culmination of a gospel-long invitation to perceive humanity through a divine lens. For followers of Jesus, this seeing is not merely visual but ethical, theological, and political.

Seeing the Least of These—Part II

A simple summary of Matthew 25:31–46 suggests that when the faithful followers of Jesus do things for “the least of these” (feed the hungry, hydrate the thirsty, welcome the foreigner, clothe the naked, care for the infirmed, visit the imprisoned) they are done as if it were for Jesus. When these actions are not done, it is as if we deny care for Jesus himself and ignore the lived circumstances of the ones with whom he stands in solidarity. In the last days, these actions will define those who inherit the kingdom of heaven for their just interventions (the sheep), and those who are cursed

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for eternal punishment (the goats). Both those who seek justice and those who are named unjust ask Jesus, “when did we see you” in these circumstances? The answer is a willingness or failure to do something for one of the least of Jesus’ siblings (*heni toutōn tōn adelphōn mou tōn elachistōn*). “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these [siblings] of mine, you did for me” (Matt 25:40).

As noted above, the doing that follows the seeing references other examples from Matthew’s gospel that the disciples witnessed throughout the gospel. Warren Carter interprets the actions and the implications of Matthew 25:31–46 at length:

On feeding the hungry, see 12:1–8; 14:13–21; 15:32–39, where it is an act that counters the mismanagement and greed of the elite. Giving drink to the thirsty is a response of welcome to disciples as they conduct their mission (10:42). To welcome [immigrants] is to do Jesus’ teaching of indiscriminate love (5:43–48) especially for the marginalized, whether in casting out demons (9:32–34), healing the broken, including foreigners (8:1–13; 15:21–28), or eating with sinners (9:9–13; 11:19). Giving clothing to the naked expresses the same indiscriminate and practice love. To take care of the sick is to continue Jesus’ healing work in imitation of his compassion (4:23–24; 8:14–17; 9:36; cf. 9:13; 12:7), and in obedience to his command (10:7–8). To visit those in prison is to provide food, drink, and clothing. See 5:42; 6:1–4 for such actions which are to be contrary to dominant cultural practices in that they are nonreciprocal and are concerned for the needs of the other, not the honor and social credit of the giver.³

We are expected to do or to act on behalf of “the least these” if our desire is to be considered faithful justice-seeking disciples of Jesus. I argue that twenty-first century acts of discipleship to see, in the context of Matthew 25:37–39 (and 44), hold internalized asymmetries of power by which social or ecclesial interventions are gestures of charity not solidarity. Identities are formed by thinking oneself better than, wealthier than, smarter than, holier than others that have been encultured throughout modernity. Privilege dictates

3. Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2000), 496.

who is worthy to be seen and who is overlooked. Dean Spade, transgender activist and Associate Professor at Seattle University School of Law writes, “the charity model we live with today has origins in Christian European practices of the wealthy giving alms to the poor to buy their way into heaven. It is based on a moral hierarchy of wealth—the idea that rich people are inherently better and more moral than poor people, which is why they deserve to be on top.”⁴ There is an assumption that disciples can clearly see the plight of the ones with whom Jesus would be in solidarity today. However, we/they (depending on one’s perspective)⁵ do not automatically see (or we/they are enculturated to overlook) the systemic structures rooted in white supremacy, class privilege, capitalism, misogyny, anti-blackness, xenophobia, queer antagonisms, and trans-aggressions built to keep certain people hungry, thirsty, illegal, naked, sick, and imprisoned. We/they are enculturated to overlook that the social category Matthew 25 names “the least of these” is constructed at the intersection of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and Christianity. Jesus situates himself at this epicenter of oppression, seeking to be seen. QoCBC’s intervention asks at least three questions to readers of Matthew 25:31–46 in our current time:

1. When did we see Jesus among LGBTQ homeless youth, black transgender women, the homeless, the unjustly deported, those who cannot afford health insurance or are losing Medicare and Medicaid benefits, and other invisible oppressed people?
2. What interventions will we make to address the systems and social hierarchies that maintain the invisibility of certain kinds of humanity?
3. More than 2,000 years later, in spite of commentaries, sermons, essays, and articles on Matt 25:31–46, why are “good Christians” not willing or able to see?

Black feminist thought and women of color feminisms (e.g., Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa⁶) are part of the epistemology of queer of color critique. Because of this QoCBC adapts the oppositional gaze as a useful tool for reading Matthew 25. Social activist, feminist scholar, and pedagogue bell hooks writes:

Spaces of agency exist for Black people, wherein we can both interrogate the gaze of the Other but also look back, and at one another, naming what we see. The ‘gaze’ has been and is a site of resistance for colonized

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Black people globally. Subordinates in relations of power learn experientially that there is a critical gaze, one that ‘looks’ to document, [and] one that is oppositional. In resistance struggle, the power of the dominated to assert agency by claiming and cultivating ‘awareness’ politicizes ‘looking’ relations – one learns to look a certain way in order to resist.⁷

Those who have been constructed as the “least of these” see so-called “good Christians,” as they refuse to see us.⁸ Africana queer biblical scholar Minenhle Nomalungelo Khumalo in her reading of Genesis 16 imagines Hagar saying to God, “*I know you see me! On my life, I know I see you see me see you see me. Aren’t you god with your looking ass?*”⁹ Similarly, the “least of these” see Christians seeing them, with *our* looking asses. Those who hunger and thirst for justice (Matt 5:6) see us; the homeless see us, the immigrants in fear of deportation see us, the black transgender community sees us, queer youth see us, and the incarcerated see us (among others of “the least of these”). From their various social positions, in the words of Bravo TV’s *Real Housewives of Atlanta* star NeNe Leakes, “the least of these” are saying (with two fingers moving back and forth gesturing at our eyes), “We. See. Each. Other.”¹⁰

QoCBC invites readers to identify with and act on behalf of “the least of these” *in solidarity*, because black and women of color feminisms teach that our freedom is linked with the least of these (i.e., “no one is free until all of us are free”), and if we are really

4. Dean Spade, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During this Crisis and the Next* (London: Verso, 2020), 21.

5. “We/they” queerly signals that the pronouns of “the least of these” are unstable since the relation between those who choose to see and those who are unseen change according to context (e.g., the binaries of: “us” versus “them,” “Christian” versus “non-Christian,” “cis” versus “transgender,” “citizen” versus “foreigner,” “people of economic means” versus “the impoverished,” etc.).

6. See Cherrie Moraga & Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., Toni Cade Bambara, foreword, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Watertown: Persephone Press, 1981).

7. bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 116.

8. Here, “us” and “our” are signified by “good Christians” and those who assume a differential social privilege to see.

9. Minenhle Nomalungelo Khumalo, “Must We Burn Isaac? A Four-Part Hermeneutical Fantasy for Africana Epistemology” in Kenneth N. Ngwa, Aliou Cissé Niang, and Arthur Pressley (eds.), *Life Under the Baobab Tree: Africana Studies and Religion in a Transitional Age* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2023), 258.

10. NeNe Leakes, *Real Housewives of Atlanta*, Season 7 Reunion. Bravo TV.

reading Matthew 25:31–46, their freedom and access to livable lives is linked with ours. Borrowing from and remixing part of *Combahee River Collective Statement*, “if Black *trans* women were free, that would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression.”¹¹ This means that LGBTQ people can only be as free as our transgender siblings. It means that heterosexual black people and other racial-ethnic folks can only be as free as our black (and racial-ethnic) LGBTQ folks. It means that people of means can only be as free as those without means. It means that anyone who reads Matthew 25:31–46 as scripture can only be as free as the flourishing of “the least of these.” When “the least of these” become “us,” we enfold the kingdom of heaven on earth (Matt 6:9–13). A queer of color gaze not only provides a hermeneutical lens through which to read the Gospel of Matthew and other scriptures, it engages in critical spectatorship on the ways in which the hypocrisy of the church, and of gender politics (e.g., trans-exclusionary radical feminists), and of racialized respectability performances, and of homonormative queer activism (e.g., transgender of color exclusion from LGBTQ historiographies) render some children of God invisible.

At the same time, in some cases, the violences of hegemony, heteronormativity, and hypocrisy make it necessary for some subjects to wear social masks or to hide in plain sight as strategies for survival. This is a queer variation of Édouard Glissant’s theoretical concept of opacity. Against a colonial demand for the transparency of individuals, cultures, and the world (cf. Foucault’s *Power and Knowledge*), postcolonial subjects use opacity as a survival strategy.¹² They reveal what is safe to be seen and known, develop codes and signals to be seen by each other, and establish undercommons as circuits for alternative knowledge and sharing of resources.¹³

More than 50 years after the Stonewall riots, “coming out of the closet” is not a safe social position for all LGBTQ folks to occupy. Undocumented people and legal immigrants in the U.S. live in fear of arrest. Many people perform variations of hegemonic gender to remain acceptable and to retain employment, housing, and even church membership. To be safely seen as one’s authentic self, gender, and/or sexual orientation, un-surveilled by systems, un-regulated by the state, and unashamed by Christian cis-heteronormativity, constitutes what José Esteban Muñoz called “a queerness [that] is not yet here; it is ... a potentiality.”¹⁴ In this

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context, queerness is not only an identitarian term, or umbrella of sexual orientations, but is also a state of *being-with* in difference and communal building toward a future that is unbounded by regimes of the normal.¹⁵ It is from this potential that a queer of color gaze for the Gospel of Matthew comes into focus through a queer of color christological view.

When they see us

The kingdom of heaven is like seeing the conditions of the least of these, and acting to eradicate the systems, powers, and prejudices that create unlivable lives. This seeing and doing emerges from a sense of justice and compassion. “Mutual aid projects let us practice meeting our own and each other’s needs, based in shared commitments to dignity, care, and justice.”¹⁶ Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew models this potentiality by his actions and the lessons he taught by parable and example to his disciples, especially after having seen. Christian privilege operates under the false assumption that we have the leisure to see those who are less fortunate than us by our charity and sense of who “deserves” to be helped and advocated for. This assumption is blind to realities that we are one hurricane, one paycheck, one market crash, or one election away from being “these” and being “the least of these.”

On behalf of those who hunger and thirst after justice, the question might no longer be “when did we see you,” but the testimony could be “this is what we did about it,” giving thanks to God who gives such authority to human beings (Matt 9:8). This is a queerness that is not yet here but is a potentiality. It is a transformational politics of mutual aid to ensure that all people, especially those made by the empire to be hungry, thirsty, estranged, infirmed, naked, imprisoned, or ashamed have access to the conditions of possibility for livable lives that give way toward thriving. “The least of these” are confident that *we see each other*, and that Jesus the Son of Humanity (Matt 25:31) sees us, knows us, and is always in solidarity with us—“even to the end of the age” (Matt 28:20).

15. This queer state of being has scriptural examples in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2:1–21) and the fulfilling of communal needs by the sharing of all things in common (Acts 4:32–37).

16. Spade, *Mutual Aid*, 39.

11. Combahee River Collective, “Combahee River Collective Statement, 1977” (Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.) <http://circuitous.org/scraps/combahee.html>

12. See Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989); and *Poetics of Relation*, Translated by Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

13. See Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013); and José Esteban Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*, edited and with an Introduction by Joshua Chambers-Letson and Tavia Nyong’o (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).

14. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 21.