

Tom Coop
Matthew 25:31-46
February 5, 2017

DOING What We SAY We BELIEVE

As the worshipers arrived on a late November morning at the Lutheran Church in White Lake, North Dakota, they were met by a rather disturbing sight.

An apparently homeless beggar sat on the front steps of the church, wearing tattered clothing, a wool cap pulled down over his eyes, and clutching a bottle in fingerless gloves.

I tell you, they had never seen anything quite like this in White Lake, North Dakota.

Most worshipers simply walked around the man, or stepped over him, as he sat there.

Some muttered words of disapproval, and others suggested that the man move to another doorway before the Sunday School children arrived.

One member told the man, in no uncertain terms, that the Salvation Army in Minot was a more appropriate place to sleep it off.

At one point, a kind woman brought the man a Styrofoam cup of hot coffee, but not one person asked the man to come in out of the cold, and certainly nobody invited him in to join them in worship.

Imagine, then, the people's surprise during the opening hymn, when the homeless man made his way into the pulpit and took off his cap. It was ... their pastor!

The pastor began his remarks that morning in this way:

“I didn’t do this to embarrass you or to poke you in the eye. I did it to remind us that this is a person that Jesus loves, and he has called us to love him, too.”

He then read their scripture text for the day, which just happens to be ours as well.

Let me set the context for you. Jesus is at the end of his ministry. He is about to be betrayed, arrested, tried, convicted, and crucified. So, these words were kind of his last hurrah.

And, thus, this being one of Jesus’ last teachings, it should add some weight to his message.

After all, who remembers the coach’s locker room speech from some game in the middle of the season? But, the one before the big championship game? Well, that one is blazoned into our hearts and minds forever.

So, we need to pay attention, right?

Today marks the beginning of our Stewardship campaign. The four weeks most pastors and congregations dread the most.

I mean, who wants to be made to feel guilty about how much or how little we give to the church ... whether it is our time, talent or especially treasures?

And yet, sometimes that is the best barometer of our faithfulness, isn't it?

I promise to try and stay far, far away from guilt!

Matthew knows, as did Jesus, that we often make things complicated that are not complicated.

Giving food to the hungry. Giving water to the thirsty. Welcoming the stranger. Clothing the naked. Caring for the sick. Visiting those in prison.

It's so simple, it's almost an insult. And to add to the insult, the list is repeated four times in 10 verses just in case we miss the point.

Where else in the Bible do you see something repeated four times in 10 verses?

What God wants from us is essentially kindness, love of neighbor.

The church's mission, if we are to believe our text, needs to be, to reorder relationships and resources so that those on the bottom rung, the forgotten ones, are included in the blessings of creation.

The kingdom is about people helping people. It is bringing healing and harmony where there is hurt and discord.

It is simple, but not easy. It's not easy because there are many forces around us that make it difficult, right?

Greed can make it difficult. Cultural and economic values can make it difficult.

Structural systems and accepted traditions make it difficult.

Misguided theology and false teaching make it difficult.

Idols of worship and misdirected allegiances, ignorance, misinformation, lust for power, status and control make it difficult. Apathy makes it difficult.

It may sound simple to feed hungry people, welcome strangers, and it is. But it is not easy.

The fact is, the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. Tax laws continue to put a heavier burden on the poor.

Women and children suffer the most from injustices. If it is so simple, why is it so difficult?

The cross is a constant reminder that to love one's neighbor is not always easy or well received. Just ask Jesus!

And so, during Stewardship, we are reminded that God needs our time – to help those who are on the fringes, especially in our community, but also the world.

Some of you are familiar with Jim Wallis. Wallis is often featured on TV news talk shows as a spokesman for the progressive Christian community. He is an editor of Sojourner magazine and the author of several very important books.

I was at a talk that Wallis gave at Sunnyvale Presbyterian Church last Monday night.

During his remarks, Wallis told about the ministry of the Sojourners Neighborhood Center in Washington, D.C., his hometown.

This center stands just ten blocks from the White House.

On any given day, three hundred families stand in line outside the center to receive a bag of groceries which is critical to getting them through the week.

Just before the doors are opened and all the people come in, all those who help prepare the food, join hands and say a prayer.

The prayer is often offered by Mary Glover, a sixty-year-old black woman who knows what it means to be poor and knows how to pray.

Wallis told us that Mary Glover prays like someone who knows to whom she is talking. She has been carrying on a conversation with her Lord for many, many years.

She first thanks God for another day, "Another day to serve you, Lord," she says.

And then Mary Glover prays something like this, "Lord, we know that you'll be coming through this line today so, Lord, help us to treat you well."

As I was preparing this sermon, someone came AFTER HOURS for some food. I think it was about 4 pm.

I explained that the office was only open until 3:00 and he'd have to come back tomorrow. He was very gracious and left.

But, let me ask you, did I treat him like I would have treated Jesus? According to Jesus, that was him. I was busted! I believe I may have missed interacting with Jesus that day.

Indeed, Jesus seems to be promising — to those of us born centuries too late to meet the historical Jesus in person — that the closest we can come to a transformative face-to-face encounter with Jesus is to aid and be fully present to poor and marginalized.

To adapt Jesus' words, "Truly I tell you, however you treat the least of my sisters or brothers is how you have treated me."

And then, did you notice in our text that those who are invited to come and inherit the kingdom are surprised?

Notice. "Lord, when did we do all those kindnesses to you?" They seemed unaware of the full implications of their lives centered around justice toward hurting people.

Likewise, the people excluded from the kingdom are also surprised.

"Lord, when did we not feed you? You've got to be kidding. Everything we've done has been Christ-centered. We base everything on the Bible. And our pastors always preach Christ-centered sermons."

Reminds me of a cartoon I saw that showed an old woman, sitting on a porch, reading her Bible.

Two kids were walking by. One said to the other, "That's my grandma. She's cramming for her finals."

A lot of people have the same attitude. But most of them are working on stuff that won't even be on the test!

Bible reading, prayer, church attendance, commitment to the church. All of these are important, but none of them are found in Jesus' final exam material.

There is nothing said here about justification by faith, being born again, or even being baptized.

There is no mention of belief systems, forgiveness, or proper understanding of grace.

It won't make any difference what you study, if you can't see the face of Jesus in family, friends and neighbors.

And if you can't see the face of Jesus in the face of strangers, then it won't matter what you've learned. Or how much Bible trivia you know.

You know what I think I've come to realize this week, is that our text for this morning, as much as any other, should be the guide for our mission statement, our budget, our programs and even our staffing in our church.

This, I believe, really needs to be the focus of our stewardship campaign, not just this year, but all years.

And so, I believe this text invites us to repent, to focus, and to celebrate, as we seek to reorder our relationships and resources, in response to the good news of the gospel.

We need to repent of making complicated what is so simple. We need to repent of placing our primary emphasis on right formulas, right worship, right intellectualizing, rather than on serving human needs.

We need to repent of our complicit acceptance of systems and traditions that have put people into situations of being hungry, poor, strangers, naked, sick and imprisoned.

We need to repent of structuring the church in such a way that it has been co-dependent on addiction to wealth and missed the essential element of mission.

We need to repent of being selfish in displaying more concern for our salvation than for the needs of the least of these.

To feed the hungry today means more than simple food shared with those who can't afford bread, although that is certainly important.

It means a change in the ordering of relationships and resources so that all people can share in the blessings of creation.

For that to happen, there needs to be some radical conversions in the hearts of people as well as the economics of the household.

When Matthew included this story of Jesus in his gospel, he wanted it to lead to basic change.

That is Good News, especially for those who yearn to have a real relationship with Jesus.

This means that when we balance the inward journey and the outward journey of our lives, we will see that the ultimate focus has to be on our love for our neighbor.

Jesus tells us this story in Matthew so that we, individually and as a church, will have a compass, a perspective, that will guide our decisions.

The basic problem is that too many of us have changed our Theology into Me-ology . . . meaning that my real concern is for me . . . but not for Thee.

To many, the church is to serve me . . . to meet my needs . . . a place to seek my salvation . . . to worship my God.

That's Me-ology. It is not really concerned about the needs of others.

However, if our faith is alive, it will naturally move us from Me-ology to Thee-ology.

If our love is real, it will motivate us to live sacrificially and give generously from our abundance for the sake of those who are hurting.

You and I have been blessed beyond measure. That's our stewardship theme, "Counting Ourselves Blessed." We know the Good News.

We who have been so richly blessed, must realize that we are blessed for a purpose.

We are not blessed because we have worked hard. Many have worked harder and have nothing.

We are not blessed because we are so good or because we deserve to be blessed.

No, we have been given much so that we can give much. In Luke 7: 47 Jesus said, "To whom much has been given, much is required."

There is no question that much has been given to us. Therefore, God expects us to share with those who have so much less.

John Wesley eloquently advised people to "Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, to all the people you can, as long as you ever can.

Christ may not be calling you to devote your life in full-time service to the hurting, but he does call you to do something.

Whether it is visiting a nursing home, or helping in a soup kitchen, or simply taking an interest in a needy family, to be a disciple of Jesus Christ is to be serving those less fortunate than ourselves.

This is something we do not only for them, but for ourselves.

It is easy for us to insulate ourselves from those in need. Then we grow callous to their need.

Even more deadly, we begin to imagine that we somehow deserve our good fortune, and our hearts grow cold and hard.

We forget our purpose for being here and we become miserably self-indulgent.

Besides, if we don't ever spend our time serving those in need, we will probably never encounter Christ in human flesh.

So now, the question that stands before us is this: What does our lifestyle say about us? What does your lifestyle say about you?

According to Jesus' words, it seems to say this: We will recognize the sheep and the goats by the way they live their lives.

You see, sheep graciously share what they have, paying particular attention to those who are in desperate need. Goats want to keep all they have to themselves.

Sheep see others in distress, and they are moved to compassion. But goats see others in distress and they are moved to ignore.

In short, when goats see an apparently homeless man, sitting on the steps of a church, they see a homeless man.

When sheep see an apparently homeless man, sitting on the steps of a church, they see Jesus.

Who do you see?

The gifts we give have the capacity to touch the lives of people in this church, in this community, and around the world. The needs of people are growing, so our ministry opportunities have grown, too.

Someone once said “We can give without loving, but we cannot love without giving.”

May we truly love the people that Jesus loves. And may that love, at least partly be evident by our gifts, now ... and always.

Amen!

BENEDICTION

“Franciscan Blessing.” A Franciscan Blessing is a benediction in the spirit of St. Francis of Assisi who famously gave up his inheritance to serve the poor.

May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships, so that you may live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may work for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation and war, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and to turn their pain into joy.

May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in this world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done.