

WHY WE DO THE THINGS WE DO

A SERMON FOR ORDINARY TIME

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First Presbyterian Church of Marianna

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MATTHEW 25:31-46

In the 25th chapter of Matthew's gospel, Jesus is telling parables of the kingdom of heaven. He begins by saying that the kingdom of heaven will be like those ten bridesmaids or virgins, who were waiting on the bridegroom, and half were wise and half were foolish, which is a higher percentage of wise ones than at most weddings I've conducted. The wise ones trimmed their wicks and saved their oil, and the foolish ones got locked out of the party.

The point of that parable was to be alert, for no one knows when the bridegroom is coming.

The second section of the chapter is the parable of the talents, where the Lord who is coming is compared to a man going on a journey, entrusting great wealth to his servants. I believe that the point of that parable is that we are to use the gifts that God has given us wisely and well, and to the glory of God.

We come this morning to the final parable of the kingdom, what is really the last teaching of Jesus to His disciples before Holy Week. The next chapter, 26, tells the story of the arrest and betrayal of Jesus. Now if you knew you were going to die, and you wanted to leave behind instructions, a legacy, a last will and testament, you might well save it for the last thing you did. Well, that is what our lesson this morning is.

This is the parable of the Great Judgment. It has probably shaped my life and ministry more than any other teaching of Jesus. It has been reflected in the way that I have led every church that I have ever served. And I think it is the mission statement for the entire Christian church, from the first to the twenty-first century. I think it is the rationale for mission of the church. It tells us why we do the things we do.

Now I would not diminish the Great Commission, Jesus' final instructions, at the end of Matthew's gospel, which give us the direction for the church's witness and purpose, to make disciples of all nations, to baptize them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that Jesus commanded. (See MATTHEW 28:18-20)

What the parable of the Great Judgment tells us is what those disciples are to be doing. Evangelism, winning converts to Christ, is a wonderful thing. But if those converts, those new disciples, don't do anything, don't exhibit a change in their lives, don't influence the world around them in a positive way, what good are they?

I went to seminary more than forty-five years ago. In those days, the argument was over whether the church's primary mission was evangelism or social action. I don't think it is possible to separate the two. Someone once defined evangelism as one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread. Whether that bread be The Bread of Life, the Word of God, Jesus Christ, or whether that bread be a loaf of whole wheat or white bread, makes no difference. We must feed the body as well as the soul. Someone once said, and I think it was Dr. L. Nelson Bell, Billy Graham's father in law, that a man cannot hear the gospel preached over the growling of an empty stomach. At the same time, Dr. Bell, a life-long missionary to China, deplored what he called "rice Christians" who came only for the free food handed out at the missions in China.

I remember some folks from the inner city cluster of churches in Louisville, Kentucky, where I worked my first year in seminary discussing this issue. One church said that they focused all of their attention to mission on evangelism. Another said they didn't do evangelism, their ministry was social action. Yet the church that did "only evangelism" fed dozens of families every year, with Thanksgiving and Christmas baskets, and a community meal. And the church that did "only social action" had an active neighborhood teen center that led many young people into a relationship with Jesus Christ and His church.

Jesus, who is both our Shepherd and our Judge, will separate the righteous from the unrighteous, and the criteria for that separation are stated clearly in our text for today. Feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming strangers, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, visiting those in prison, these are the things the righteous do, and the unrighteous don't do.

And the question that both the righteous and the unrighteous ask is an important question: "Lord, when was it that we saw you ...?"

"Lord, when did we see you and minister to you?" the righteous ask. "Lord, when did we see you and not minister to you?" the unrighteous ask. Neither one ever saw Jesus, but He was there, in the least worthy of those, the poorest of those, the neediest of those, who came looking for help, or who simply sat by the side of the road needing help.

My friend Ron Kruzel has a presentation that he does that brings this point home. Ron dresses as a homeless person, and sort of crouches in the landscaping around the church where he is preaching as a guest preacher. Some churches

welcome him, invite him in for coffee and donuts, usher him into the sanctuary for worship. Some churches call the police to have him removed from the grounds.

Either way, when he removes his tattered rags, and pulls off his scraggly wig and beard, people are shocked, surprised, disbelieving that this is the preacher for the day.

It is a powerful message, a powerful example. And it is a demonstration of what Jesus was telling us in the Parable of the Great Judgment: “Even as you did it unto the least of these who are members of my family, you did it unto me.”

And that is why we do the things we do in the church. That is why we feed the hungry, through food pantries and community meals, and overseas shipments of food. That is why we pay water bills, and buy pumps, and drill wells and send agriculturalists to foreign lands. That is why we welcome strangers. That is why we have clothes closets and even rummage sales, and send barrels of clothing overseas and to Indian reservations. That is why we visit the sick in hospitals and homes, and why some churches have parish nurses, and why so many churches send out medical missionaries and why so many hospitals have names that show their church affiliation. I was born in a Presbyterian Hospital. My three brothers were born in a Baptist Hospital. I took my chaplaincy training at a Roman Catholic Hospital, and had life-saving surgery at a hospital founded by The King’s Daughters, an interdenominational Christian women’s group. And that is why we have organizations like CAIROS and other Prison Ministries.

Why do we do the things we do? Because that is what Jesus showed us in the parable of the Great Judgment that we should be doing. We don’t do it to prove we are righteous, to earn our way into heaven. We do it because He has made us righteous, He has called us righteous, and our way into heaven is through Him and His righteousness.

Let us pray. Lord, may the things we do reflect Your Presence in our lives, and may we see your face in all who come to us for help. In your name, Jesus, we pray. Amen.