Natalie W. Bell
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Christ the King Sunday

The Least of These
Matthew 25: 31-46

31 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will ***sit on the throne of his glory***.
32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will ***separate people*** one from another as a shepherd separates the ***sheep from the goats,***
33 and he will put the ***sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.***
34 Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "***Come, you that are blessed*** by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; **35** for ***I was hungry*** and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me,
36 I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'
37 Then the righteous will answer him, "***Lord, when was it that we saw YOU*** hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?
38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? **..** you sick or in prison and visited you?'
40 And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, ***just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to ME.'***
41 Then he will say to those at his left hand, "***You that are accursed***, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels;
42 for I was hungry and ***you gave me no food***, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, **43** I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.'
44 Then they also will answer, ***"Lord, when was it that we saw YOU hungry*** or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?'
45 Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, ***you did NOT do it to me.'*** **46** And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

Most of us have heard these verses before—
Jesus talking about how we treat ***the LEAST of these.***
But do you know ***WHEN*** he said these words?

Jesus tells this story after talking about the ***end of the age,***

when the Son of Man (himself) would come back again,
to ***judge*** humanity, and ***usher in*** the kingdom of heaven.

He tells parables about what we are to do ***WHILE WE WAIT*** for His return,
like the parable of the ***10*** wise and foolish bridesmaids,
Or the parable of the ***talents***, where only two of three servants used them.

He compares the kingdom of God to these situations,
and now, he is talking about the day
the Son of Man will ***RETURN, AND JUDGE all of humanity***.

And that judgment of humanity is BASED ON ONE THING.
Whether we are separated like sheep or goats rests on one activity:
how we treat people in need.

This is essentially Jesus' ***GREATEST COMMANDMENT IN ACTION***:
loving God and loving our neighbor,
because ultimately ***God is our neighbor***!

This is also Jesus the GOOD SHEPHERD,
separating the sheep from the goats,
just like real Middle Eastern shepherds would do.
But hearing about God's judgment is ***sobering***, isn't it?
We don't like to talk or think about God's judgment--
We prefer to focus on the ***compassion and mercy*** of God.
But, what if GOD'S COMPASSION AND MERCY are part of the judgment?

Pastor Lindsay Armstrong in *Feasting on the Word*,
compares this story to an annual ***wellness check-up*** at the doctor's office.
We often avoid those, because we don't always like what we hear, right?
(Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 4, pg. 333)

But Armstrong says if we want the health of OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD, we need a "faith check up", and we need to ask ourselves:
how are we treating people in need?
How are we ***loving*** our neighbors?
Are we ***apathetic*** about their needs?
Or worse (and all too common) are we ***BLAMING them*** for being needy?

It's important to examine our hearts---Are we too focused on OURSELVES?
Or our ***own*** friends and family?
Or even our ***own*** church family?
OR are we ***loving, beyond these walls?***

What if we used THANKSGIVING AS A WELLNESS CHECK for the soul?
By asking ourselves: How is love flowing out of ***OUR LIVES***?
And out of ***OUR CHURCH?***

I once heard former PCUSA Moderator, Rev. Jan Edmiston
Ask the best question to guide churches in mission:
WHAT IS BREAKING GOD'S HEART?
What is that—today? in our community? Our nation? Our world?

Certainly people ***barely making ends meet*** are breaking God's heart,
And others who might end up in prison from desperate choices or addiction.
What about people ***without housing?***
Or who are ***ill, and might not have access to healthcare,***
And what about ***immigrants***, and how they are being treated right now?

Pastor Julissa Alvarez Garcia leads the Principe de Paz church
in Cliffwood Beach--one of our closest neighboring Presbyterian churches.
And our mission commission has reached out to them—
because they are largely immigrants, living in fear,
Or struggling financially—because they stay at home out of fear.
Praise God we can stand in solidarity with them,
We can offer help through our food pantry and other missions.
We have so many opportunities to bless our brothers and sisters,
Even around the corner!

Sometimes it's EASIER TO SERVE AND LOVE AT THE HOLIDAYS.
We adopt angels,
we help fill Thanksgiving baskets,
But how do we ***continue*** this, ***all year long?***

There's an old story of a SMALL JEWISH TOWN IN RUSSIA,
where the rabbi disappears each Friday morning for several hours.
His devoted disciples boast that during those hours,
their rabbi goes to heaven and talks to God.

A stranger moves into town, and he's pretty SKEPTICAL,
so he decides to check it out. He hides and watches.
He sees the rabbi get up in the morning, say his prayers,
Then he leaves home, wearing old, ragged clothes.
He grabs an axe, goes off into the woods, and cuts a bunch of firewood,
which he hauls to a shack on the outskirts of the village.
It's the home of an old woman caring for her ill son.
He leaves them enough wood for a week, and then sneaks back home.

Having OBSERVED THE RABBI'S actions,
the newcomer stays in that village and becomes his disciple.
And whenever he hears one of the villagers say,
"*On Friday morning our rabbi ascends all the way to heaven*,"
the newcomer quietly adds, "***If not HIGHER*.**"
Jim McGuiggan, Jesus, Hero of Thy Soul (Howard Publishing, 1998), p.15

How do we follow ***THAT EXAMPLE***?
Helping people in need ***can be overwhelming***---like putting a drop in the ocean!
How do we ***know*** which ones to help?
And can we even ***make a difference?***

Jesus says it's our CALLING to help people IN OUR PATH,
And the ***ONLY criteria*** is whether they are needy,
not whether they are ***DESERVING OR GRATEFUL***
OR HAPPY to receive from us!
We serve ***when God calls us to serve***---whoever, wherever.
We usually want a thank you, a smile, a word of gratitude--
But that's NOT part of the deal!

Jesus urges us to see the DIGNITY AND VALUE of everyone in need,
They are children of God—bearers of ***God's image***,
Even those who ***don't or can't love*** us back!
There is ***nothing*** in scripture about
their RESPONSE, ***only OUR ACTIONS***.
We love, without expecting anything in return.

So is Jesus just encouraging GOOD WORKS?
If we help a bunch of needy people,
Are we 'good Christians'? Going to heaven?

That's definitely not the message!
Because ***both groups***—are ***SURPRISED*** by the Lord's words.
They ***can't believe that the Lord was*** in those needy people.
Lord, ***when was it*** *that we saw YOU hungry, or thirsty, naked, or in prison?*
And the King says, *whatever you did for one of the least of these,*
you did for ME.

In other words, the ones who served DIDN'T DO IT FOR MORALITY POINTS.
We ***don't keep score*** of who we help,
Because it's ***not about works***!
It's all about ***LOVE***.
And Love doesn't keep score.
Love ***flows out of us—***because ***God loves us first.***
We can serve, because Jesus has served and helped us!

And we ARE GOING TO BE SURPRISED where we find God!
We live in a crazy time where so many different people
are not even referred to as people—
They are called trannies, illegals, deadbeats.
And we must reject all of that.
It's not who we are as followers of Jesus.

One hopeful thing has been some talk in our country about LOVE,
About decency, and treating others the way we want to be treated—
About stepping into someone else's shoes.
We have lost that—so maybe as Christians we can help bring it back!

Now God does aways have a SENSE OF HUMOR about love--
Sometimes we are called to love the person who is ***so annoying***!
Or ***never grateful***,
Or always ***asks for more***!
But, they are ***people, just like us---maybe more like us that we care to admit!***

Jesus urges love and care FOR ALL.
People are not annoyances, or inconveniences—they are ***children of God.***
There are people near us who are ***hungry***, ***thirsty***,
Needing to be ***welcomed!***
Who are sick, or struggling with pain or addiction or loneliness!

How will we reach out--NOT JUST WHEN IT'S COMFORTABLE?
(Because it's usually NOT!)
What does that look like—in ***our LIVES?***
And through ***our CHURCH?***
What if the needy are sitting by us ***here***, or at a ***holiday table***?

Remember when the surgeon general called
SOCIAL ISOLATION A MAJOR HEALTH CRISIS?
Loneliness does lead to more heart disease, stroke, premature death, and violence.
One of the most severe punishments for prisoners is ***solitary confinement***!
We are ***not meant to be all alone.***

Aaron Kheriaty of the U.C. Irvine School of Medicine
wrote about a man in his thirties who took his own life
by ***jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge*** (as many others have done).
After his death, his psychiatrist went with the medical examiner to the man's apartment to help locate family, and they found his diary.
The last entry, written just hours before he died, said,
"*I'm going to walk to the bridge.*
If one person smiles at me on the way, I will NOT JUMP."
Aaron Kheriaty, "Dying of Despair" August 2017, First Things.

So, how are we PAYING ATTENTION?
Are we putting ourselves into other's shoes?
How good is our ***empathy***?

In their book ***Next Door As It Is in Heaven***,
Lance Ford and Brad Briscoe discuss the ***PROFOUND LONELINESS*** so prevalent in our world, and how ***we perpetuate it***--
by rarely offering even a simple greeting to people we encounter.

In contrast, the tribes of northern Natal in SOUTH AFRICA,
have a common greeting, equivalent to "hello" in English.
They say: *Sawu bona*.
It literally means, "***I see you***."
Then the other member of the tribe,
Replies by saying: *Sikhona*, ***"I am here."***
The ***ORDER*** is important.
It's a greeting that means: ***when you see me, I exist***.

You can see HOW POWERFUL that could be, in our world today!
Ford and Briscoe write, "*When we merely move throughout our days* ***without seeing people as people****, … they really* ***don't exist****. … [But] being conscious of how we approach people we encounter through the normal routines of our day is a step toward bringing …* ***heaven here on our patch of earth."***
Lance Ford & Brad Briscoe, Next Door As It Is In Heaven (NavPress, 2016), page 76.

Isn't that what Jesus taught us to pray? ***On earth, as it is in heaven?***

How can we TRULY SEE one another?
How can we serve people in need—by paying attention?
By ***reaching out when we feel a nudge*** from God--
to call, write, stop by, or just listen?
Are you open to those nudges?
We CAN'T help everyone, but EVERYONE CAN HELP SOMEONE.

Friends, hear the GOOD NEWS of the Gospel,
Whenever we serve the least of these, ***we are serving JESUS HIMSELF.***
May the love of ***God flow out of us, to ALL of our neighbors.***
And for that, all God's people can say together, Amen.