

“THE LEAST OF THESE”  
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Ephesians 1:15-23

Matthew 25:31-46

Every week in our worship service we hear a Gospel lesson. Every week. Some weeks the Gospel lesson is sweet, and we’re reminded of Jesus who loves us, gives us life - abundant and eternal - through his death and resurrection. We’ve had some “sweet” Gospel lessons the past few weeks – last week we heard Jesus pray for unity among all of his followers, and the week before, when Jonathan Baker was with us telling us about the mission in the Congo, we heard the lesson about Jesus healing the paralyzed man – the one brought to him through the roof by his determined friends.

They were both sweet Gospel lessons, and we went away from here knowing God’s love, grace and mercy poured out in Christ Jesus. That actually happens a lot of weeks – sweet Gospel lessons that inspire us and encourage us and lift us up.

But not this week. At first glance, upon first hearing, this lesson from Matthew is anything but sweet. It’s tough. Really tough. Really hard hitting. And rather than make us feel all warm and fuzzy, it’s probably made most of us squirm this morning, right?

I mean, listen to what Jesus is saying. “Okay, here’s the deal. When the end comes, everyone’s going to be separated depending on how they have lived and loved. If you have loved and cared for all of my children, especially those in need, you will be rewarded; but if you haven’t, you’ll be condemned for all eternity.”

Wow! I don’t know about you, but I can’t figure any way around what Jesus is saying. There is no wishy-washiness about it. It’s straightforward, right out there.

Every time I hear this lesson, I think of something Mark Twain once said. “It is not what I don’t understand about the Bible that bothers me. It is what I do understand!” Oh man, is he right. We totally understand what Jesus is saying here – that’s why we squirm. Because as soon as we hear it, at least with me, I try to figure out where I am in the equation – a sheep or a goat?

And, I kid you not, every time I come up to an intersection or a store entrance where someone is begging for help, and (I confess) avert my eyes away from them – every time, this scripture comes to my mind – and I wrestle with it. What am I supposed to do?”

See what I mean? It's a tough lesson. There's no way any of us can listen to it without it being intensely personal.

And what makes it harder is that what Jesus is saying is so counter-cultural, at least in terms of our world today. We live in a world that tells us to take care of ourselves first, take care of our needs first, accumulate all that we can, so that we'll have enough ourselves. And it's also a world that tempts us to have the attitude – “let them pull themselves up by their own bootstraps” or “if they spent as much time looking for work as panhandling, well . . .”

Well, you get the picture. And here comes Jesus telling us to care for others as we would care for him, and if and how we do that will determine where we'll spend eternity. Tough lesson.

So, this morning, what I hope to do, is to make it a little less tough and a lot more invitational – because I don't think Jesus' goal in saying those words was to scare us – I think his goal was to invite us to fully embrace our faith in such a way that we will naturally come to live in love, live caring for others.

Pastor James Moore put it this way: “It's not enough just to hear it (faith) preached from our pulpits. It's not enough to just sing it in our hymns. It's not enough to just talk about it in our Sunday School classes. Faith is life-style – a way of living!”

He goes on: “Christianity is not merely a set of intellectual ideas, a collection of theological beliefs, a series of philosophical arguments. *It is a way of life*, a way of acting and responding, a way of relating to God and to people. It's a life-style . . . not just a way of believing, but a way of behaving. Our faith is not just something we proclaim and celebrate in the sanctuary; it is something we live out and demonstrate and share with others at home, in the office, on the street, on the tennis court, even on a date. (James W. Moore, *Yes Lord, I Have Sinned, But I Have Several Excellent Excuses*, “The Sin of Just Talking a Good Game,” p. 23-24)

You see, I think that's what Jesus is trying to get us to think about in this lesson. What is my faith all about? Is it only about me and Jesus, or has it touched my life in such a way that I cannot keep it to myself – I need to live out my faith with my life and reach out to others? Faith is not meant to be a Sunday morning only, or a personal relationship with Jesus only prospect. It's meant to be part of the whole of our lives.

Have you ever heard the story about the missionaries who were going to work with a primitive tribe in Africa, and since they didn't know how they were going to be received, they decided to send a gift along ahead of them? They arranged to have a plow flown into the village to help them with their agriculture.

But when they got there, they realized that the people there had no idea what a plow was for, and had set it up in the middle of the town on a pedestal, and were worshipping it as an idol? (Ibid.)

The one who told this story said, “That plow, of course, was designed to be used, not revered. It was designed to strike deep into the African soil and produce food for their tables. It was designed to work for the people, to help the people, to nourish the people, make them healthier, make their quality of life better. But the members of that primitive tribe didn’t know that, so the plow became an ornament, rather than a tool!”

Likewise, he said, “this is what we are always tempted to do with our faith: make it an ornament rather than a tool; think of it as an object of veneration, rather than a means to personal and social transformation; see it as a lovely set of ideals to be laid neatly upon a pedestal, rather than as a powerful force designed to revolutionize our manner of life – and indeed the whole fabric of society.” (Ibid)

Phew! But he is absolutely right, and I think that’s what Jesus was challenging us to see. Faith without works can be hollow, and works without faith lack meaning and purpose.

So you see, instead of this being an invitation from Jesus to squirm in our seats, it is an invitation from him for us to realize the fullness of faith that becomes possible through the way we live our lives and share his love with others. So today, I hope we don’t fixate on whether we’ll end up as a sheep or a goat, I hope we’ll be inspired to experience our faith fully by sharing the love that Christ first shared with us.

And how do we do that? Well, first, by seeing others, by noticing them. I told you earlier how I, and I’m fairly certain many of you, have become adept at averting my eyes from things I don’t want to see, or don’t know what I could do to possibly help.

I’m always reminded of the religious people in the parable of the Good Samaritan. Remember them? They saw the man who was lying on the side of the road after having been beaten, but then they chose not to see him, for as the scripture says, “they passed by on the other side.”

How many times do we too “pass by on the other side,” choosing not to engage with someone in need, or not even look them in the eye? Jesus bids us to do otherwise.

I’ll never forget having a conversation with some parishioners here after they had worked at the Rotating Homeless Shelter. Someone around them made a comment about how we shouldn’t be helping out the homeless, that we were only enabling them, and anyway, how Elkton was being brought down by homeless people – and those parishioners jumped all over them, disagreeing vehemently. Why? Because they had taken the time to stop and be with the homeless and look them in the eyes and hear their stories. They had taken the time to do what they could to help.

That's all Jesus is asking of us. "Stop, and notice those who need you. When you do that to them, you're doing it to me," he says. And just to be clear, I'm not fixating just on those who are homeless – Jesus would say stop and notice anyone who needs you – it could be someone who is lonely, or even someone who is angry, or someone who is frustrated, or whatever. The point is – to stop and notice people in your path. It's what Jesus always did – it's what he calls us to do as people of faith – to not be in such a rush through life that we walk right by people.

Then, after noticing them, Jesus invites us to do something to help – whatever we can – even if the situation seems overwhelming, just do whatever we can. Someone once said that "people do not care how much we know until they know how much we care." We can say we're Christians til the cows come home, but unless we show it in our actions, our words are empty.

Jesus says, "Care for those in need. Do what you can, however little or big your efforts may be. Do what you can. You are my hands and my feet, and whatever you do will make a difference in someone else's life. I have cared for you – now go and care for others."

In fact, he says, that "when you do, when you offer care to someone else, especially to the least of these, you are caring for me." It's the ultimate show of love for Jesus – caring for those he loves.

And Jesus knows living this way will cost us – because it will take time away from focusing on ourselves, it will take using our own resources for someone besides ourselves, and it might at times, be inconvenient or awkward or even scary. But didn't he sacrifice for us? Can't we offer for him what he offered for us?

What Jesus is calling us to in this Gospel lesson is a radical living out of what we say we believe. And friends, if we accept his invitation and strive to live as he asks us to live, it will change us – absolutely, positively change us and how we see the world.

Do you remember me telling you once about the abbey where monks lived for centuries, and over the centuries they had begun to lose their passion for their mission? The abbot of the abbey went to seek advice from a wise elder about what they could do to regain their purpose and meaning in life. Together they read scripture and the elder didn't seem to have anything to helpful to say to the abbot. But as he was leaving, the elder whispered to him, "The Messiah is one of you."

A bit puzzled, the abbot went back and met with his fellow monks and told them what the elder had said. None of them really understood it, but they began to look around and figure out who was the Messiah.

Could it be the Abbott? Well, yes, he had led the group for years. Could it be Brother Thomas, a holy man, a man of light. Could it be Brother Elred, the wisest of us all? Could it possibly be Brother Philip, a quiet, shy man, kind of a nobody.

Well, they all tried to figure out who was the Messiah, and as they did, they began to treat each other with greater dignity and respect, caring for one another as if each one might be the Messiah. And you know what? It changed them. It changed their whole order. They regained that passion and sense of mission, they came back to life – and all because they were looking beyond themselves, they were noticing each other, and caring for each other, and sacrificing for each other. They treated each person as if he was the Messiah. It changed them!

My friends, that's what Jesus was talking about. If we look around us, and see everyone as the child of God they are, and treat them like we'd treat Jesus, we will be changed, and our faith will come to life.

Friends, Jesus isn't calling each of us to save the world, he's calling each of us to live our faith – to see each other, to care for each other, to sacrifice when we need to. Not just so we will end up on the right side of eternity after we die, but so we experience life in all its fullness – eternal life – here and now.

You know what? In the end, this is a sweet lesson. Because if we live as Jesus is calling us to live, it leads us right back to him – to his love, his presence, his grace – and that, my friends, is the Good News of the Gospel. Thanks be to God.

Amen.