

“WHY GO TO CHURCH? IV – TO REMEMBER THAT LIFE IS MORE  
THAN JUST ABOUT US”

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Matthew 25:31-46

You never know, from Sunday to Sunday, when you come here, what scripture you're going to hear. On some Sundays, you'll hear a lovely story about Jesus healing the sick. On others, you'll hear a wonderful psalm. On still others, you'll hear stories about our forefathers and foremothers of the faith and their incredible journeys. They're all inspiring and uplifting and, in some ways, make us feel good.

Well, today's lesson is not one of them. Today's lesson is bold and direct and challenging. In today's lesson, there are no shades of gray – it's purely black and white – and it's bold and straightforward. There is no question about what Jesus is saying, and to whom he is saying it – us.

This passage is one of the ones about which I would imagine Mark Twain said long ago – “It's ain't the parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it's the parts that I do understand.”

There's no mistaking what Jesus is saying to us in this passage that Matthew records for us. It's so clear that the great preacher Barbara Brown Taylor calls Matthew a pain; it's so clear it makes us go “yikes.”

Why? Because Jesus tells us clearly that, at the end of the day, when the Son of Man comes again, each of us will be judged, and how we lived will matter, it will determine where we spend eternity – in heaven or, well, in hell.

Yikes! That's tough stuff. Yes, it is. And it's particularly tough for all of us who live in a society, in a world, that wants us to believe just the opposite – that it is all about us – that life revolves around us – and we need to do what will make us happy – and put ourselves first – and look suspiciously on those who ask things of us, or need things from us.

Just look at all of ads floating around – all of them tell us that “we deserve it” or “we're worth it” or “we need this or that to make our lives better, more complete.” I'm telling you – look closely at advertisements and see what they're saying to you – that if you drive that particular car your life will be better, or if your hair is dyed a certain color your life will improve, or if you go to a special destination on vacation you'll be treated like the king or queen you deserve to be.” That's what we're being told 24 hours a day! It's all about you!

We're told in a thousand different ways to take care of ourselves – first and foremost. Can I tell you how many different things I got in the mail just this week inviting me to learn more about how I can get more money in my account before I retire – invitations to seminars, mailings about investment funds? Why, a few years ago, when I sat down with a financial advisor do you know what one of the first things he said to me was? He said, “You’ve got to stop giving so much money away!”

That’s the kind of world in which we live, and then, boom – smack dab in the middle of this world Jesus says, in essence, “life is not just about you, it is about others.” And, he might as well have said, “I’m dead serious.”

It matters. How we live matters, and Jesus says in this passage, that it not only matters, but God notices it. God is watching. God sees what you are doing, and in the end, it will make a difference.

One preacher I read this week said that she remembers seeing a sign above the cash register at the gift shop of the National Cathedral in Washington which read, “I may not have seen you take it. But God did!” (Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, “Knowing Glances,” p. 134.

Isn’t that what Jesus is telling us here? Make no mistake about it, God sees how you’re living your life, and it will matter in the end. Oh, we’re not used to hearing Jesus talk like this much, are we, and truth be told, we’re probably not too crazy about it – but we need to hear him, and heed his words.

Here’s the problem, though. If you’re like me, and you probably are, as Jesus lists the ways we should be reaching out and caring for others, you’re running through your mind taking a mental survey of how you’re doing. Hmm, how am I doing?

I started thinking about how we’re doing as a church, and as Jesus listed all the ways we should be caring, I have to admit I kind of sat back, and thought, you know, we’re doing pretty well. We feed the hungry – at last count, we gave almost 200 bags of groceries to a food pantry last week, and we do the Community Kitchen regularly. We welcome strangers, when they come here to worship. We visit the sick, we’re not so good at visiting the prisons. We provide food and shoes and other supplies through the Help Center and other places.

So, I guess we should feel pretty good about ourselves. I guess we know where we’re going – whether we’re sheep or goats . . . maybe, but maybe not so fast. Look more closely at the life Jesus is calling us to live. He’s not just calling us to do things for people, he’s calling us to be with people. He talks over and over again about “seeing” – when did we see thee?

Perhaps it is that Jesus wants more of us than just giving things to people in need. Perhaps it is that He wants us to be with them, to look into their eyes, to realize that they are just like us. That’s a little harder to do, that’s takes more out

of us. It takes more courage, it takes more commitment, it takes a willingness to sacrifice time out of our self-centered schedules, it takes risking being uncomfortable.

I think, deep down, that Jesus knows it's a whole lot easier to buy a bag of groceries and bring it to a truck in a church parking lot, than it is to look into the eyes of a hungry person and sit down with them for a meal. And it's a whole lot more comfortable to knit a scarf and put it in a donation bin, than going to the Homeless Shelter, looking into the eyes of a person who's struggling and giving that scarf to him or her. And it's a whole lot easier to donate money for a project with children, than it is to spend an hour looking into the eyes of a child who needs mentoring, or a youth whose parents are divorcing, or a Scout who needs help with a project. It's a lot faster to write a note and stick it in the mail to someone who's lonely, than it is to take time out of your schedule to go and visit with them, and look into their eyes and hear their story.

You see, I think Jesus gets that, and that's why he pushes us to do more and be more. It's not that any of the giving that we do is bad – by no means am I saying that – the giving that we do is incredible, life-giving and in some cases, life-saving; but in many ways it's the easy way out – we don't have to look directly into anyone's eyes or life; it's safe, it's sanitary, it's comfortable.

But that's not what Jesus wants. He invites us to look at all those in the world around us and see Him in them. Wow! Just think of what would happen if suddenly we began to do that!

Just think about that – really think about that. Think about how that would have affected your life just this morning. What if you saw the person at the coffee shop you visited before worship as Christ? Would you have spoken to him or her differently, said something more kindly, wished them a good day, given them a more generous tip?

What if you saw the person who was driving near you on the way to church as Christ? Would it have affected the way you drove, the courtesy you extended to him or her to turn ahead of you, or merge into your lane? Might you have smiled at that person?

What about as you came into the church? What if you saw every person you came to as Christ? How would you act differently – to the person holding the door open for you, the person standing alone in the hallway, the person joining you in the pew, a stranger here for the first time, a youth standing in coffee hour? If you thought each of them was Christ, would it change the way you treat them?

It's something to think about, isn't it? I think that's what Jesus is challenging us to do. Yet, I think you and I are so busy and so stressed and so focused on the next thing we have to do, or the things we have to get at the grocery

store, or the appointments we need to make, or the task we need to tackle, that we brush right by each other all the time. Sometimes when I get home on Sunday afternoons, I think about all the people I saw that morning, and I remember talking to people, but I don't remember how our conversations ended. Something or someone must have pulled me away, and I hope that I didn't just walk away or look distracted, but said something good or kind to the person before I left them. Hasn't the same thing happened to you? Life is so crazy and frenetic that it's so easy for us to walk right by people and never even see them. Jesus wants more for us – He wants us to see each other and care for each other – because as we do we see Him and care for Him.

There was a young woman once who was on an airplane trip. She was a businesswoman and spent far more time on airplanes than she wanted to – but that was her life. Well, the time came during this particular flight for the meal to be served, and the flight attendant sat the tray down in front of her. It was typical airline food, and as she looked at it, she pretty much lost her appetite, and sighed.

Just then, she glanced across the aisle at a young man in his twenties whose food tray had also just been delivered. She had already noticed this young man because he had had great difficulty getting into his seat. He had been injured in an accident and had a body cast on that pretty much engulfed the upper half of his body. Both of his arms had been broken, so he was pretty much immobilized.

This young businesswoman looked at him and thought about it for a while, about whether she should say anything to him. She could just go on and eat her meal, and keep to herself – or . . .

Well, she leaned across the aisle and asked if the flight attendant was going to help him eat. He said sort of sheepishly that he didn't know. Looking up the aisle, she could tell that no one was coming to help him, so she got up from her seat, sat down in the seat next to him, picked up his knife and fork, and awkwardly at first, began to feed him his meal. She said it was really pretty awkward, feeding a total stranger, but the longer they went, the easier it got. And along the way, he began to tell her his story – that he had been skiing, and had this accident, in which he had broken both of his arms and some ribs.

By the time the meal was ended, as she said, “their spirits had blended. It was a beautiful moment.” Then she moved back over to her seat to eat her meal, which by now, was stone cold. But you know what she discovered – it wasn't so bland after all, it was, in her words, “like holy communion – the body and blood of Christ.” Because in that encounter with that young man, as she cared for him and looked at him, and heard his story – she saw Jesus. (James W. Moore, *Attitude is Your Paintbrush*, “The Attitude of Compassion,” p. 31)

You see, that's what Jesus is talking about. Getting involved with each other, face to face, life to life. You don't have to go looking for projects to do that,

Jesus says, just keep your eyes open, and your heart open, and treat everyone in your path as if he or she were Jesus Himself.

Don't do it because you know God is watching, and don't do it just to ensure that you will be judged on the right side of eternity – do it because it's the life Jesus wants you to lead, and it's the life that is abundant and eternal, here and now.

So, you know what? Maybe this isn't a "yikes" scripture passage, maybe this is a "thank you for challenging us Jesus" passage, "thank you for calling us to remember that life is more than just about us, and that when we are kind to others, pay attention to them, and care for them, we're doing that to you.

May you and I go forth from this place with new eyes this day, my friends. May we see in all whom we meet the face of Christ, and may we care for them as we would Him. May it be so.

Amen.