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#3 Mark Vital Church—Outward Focus

Looking Outward
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?
39 And when was it that we saw 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."

Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, wrote:
The church is the church ONLY when it exists for others.

These words of Jesus remind us why that is true.
 Today is the **3rd Mark of a Vital Church—Outward Focus**.
 And Matthew 25 reminds us why this is so important--
 It's because reaching out in love, is how we love Jesus.
 It's living out the Great Commandment,
 to love God and our neighbor as ourselves.

And just like we *can't be a Christian all alone*,
 we need the body of Christ the church,
 the *church can't be the church unless it has an outward focus*,
 especially towards the least of these.

The *early church* cared so well for those in need,
 that literally thousands joined the church as a result of seeing such *love in action*.

This is *doing Love*, not just saying it, but actually doing it—
 whether you feel like it or not.

This is also about being *Salt and Light* in this world—
 getting out there to preserve life and share the Gospel,
 to let the light of Christ shine,
 instead of keeping it all to ourselves.

Today we learn that when we go out and serve others,
we are actually serving Jesus.

And yet, this is a **HARD** story because it is not just about service.
 It's also about final *judgment*—
 and God judging us based on whether we served others.
 It's about God separating the sheep and the goats—for all eternity.

In Jesus' day shepherds routinely had mixed flocks of sheep and goats.
 But *at night, they would separate* the sheep from the goats,
 allowing the sheep to have the pasture,
 and the goats had to be brought in from the cold.
 Sheep were more valuable than goats in Jesus' day.
 Maybe this is why *Jesus uses these animals* to describe judgment—
 because people could picture it.

We think of God as a *God of love and compassion*, and that is true.
 But this story also reveals just how *serious* God is

about us serving the least of these.
It's not optional. It's not just something we do occasionally.

We don't like to think about God's judgment, do we?
I prefer to think about the *love and mercy* of God!
But, what if we find God's love and mercy in this passage?
Because this is not just about how we treat others, it's about *how God treats us!*

I was reading Pastor Lindsay Armstrong, who compared Matthew 25 to an annual *wellness check-up* at the doctor's office.
We often avoid those, we don't always like what we hear, right?
(Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 4, pg. 333)

But if we *want to know how our relationship with God is* doing, we should ask ourselves, as individuals, and as a church:
how are we treating those in need?
Are we *apathetic*?
are we too *self-centered*?
are we only focused on our *own families or our own church*?
We all need this *wellness check for the soul!*

At the *holidays* it's often easier to serve those in need,
We adopt angels, we bring in gifts,
we help fill Thanksgiving baskets, but what about *year-round*?

And I'm not just talking about each of us alone, but as a church.
How is our church focused outward?
Do we make decisions based on helping the needy?
Sharing the Gospel?
Serving those who are in trouble?

Do we teach that we are ALL *created in the image of God*.
And *God IS our neighbor—in the hungry, the sick, the immigrant, the prisoner?*

William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury in the late 1880s said:
“The Church is the only institution that exists primarily for the benefit of those who are NOT its members.”

Think about that.
So often we think about outreach as a *way to get church members*.

But that is ***NOT the point***, according to Jesus.
 We ***reach out and serve, to love God and neighbor***.
 Regardless of whether people ever come inside the church!

Now, we might ask, what about helping those inside the church?
 Well, of course we need to do that.
 It's just that we ***tend to be FOCUSED too much on the insiders***,
 and Jesus wants us to remember those on the outside of our walls.

That's a real problem.
 As humans, we tend to ***prefer to help those closest to us***, as opposed to a stranger.
 There's a term for this—it's called the ***proximity factor***
 Basically, we prefer to ***help people we KNOW***, not those we don't.
 Family is often our reference point for this, or church family.
 (*Connections Commentary Year A Vol 3., pg 508*)

But what if these words of Jesus ***EXPAND our definition of FAMILY?***
 Theologian Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz suggests that we refer to the kingdom of God
 that Jesus preached, as the ***Kin-dom of God***.
 She writes: "***Kin-dom***" *makes it clear that when the fullness of God becomes a day
 to day reality in the world at large, we will all be brothers and sisters,
 siblings-kin to each other; we will indeed be the family of God.*
 Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-first Century* (Maryknoll,
 NY:Orbis, 1996), 103. N. 8.

Now that is powerful.
The Kin-dom of God—means we are all family. We are all kin.
 And if we think of everyone as a brother or sister,
 then serving the least of these takes on a whole new meaning, doesn't it?

So, what does serving the least of these look like?
How and where can you reach out?
 Even when no one is looking?

There's a story of a ***small Jewish town***,
 where a rabbi disappears each Friday morning for several hours.
 His devoted disciples boast that during those hours,
 their rabbi goes up to heaven and talks to God.

A ***stranger moves into town***, and he's skeptical about all this,

so he decides to check things out. He hides and watches.
 The rabbi gets up in the morning, says his prayers,
 and then dresses in peasant clothes.
 He grabs an axe, goes off into the woods, and cuts some firewood,
 which he then hauls to a shack on the outskirts of the village.
 Where an old woman and her sick son live.
 He leaves them the wood, enough for a week, and then sneaks back home.

Having observed the rabbi's actions,
 the newcomer stays in the 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 McGuigan, *Jesus, Hero of Thy Soul* (Howard Publishing, 1998), p.15

How do we follow that *example*?
 Of just serving, *without expecting any praise or anything in return*?

And how do we *discern* which people to help?
 Well, Jesus says the *ONLY criteria* is whether they are needy--
not whether they are *deserving or grateful or happy* to receive help!
 Wow! Think about that.

This is just about seeing the *dignity and value* of those in need,
 And treating them as children of God made in *God's image*,
 Even those who *don't or can't love* us back!
 There is *nothing* in this passage about their *response, only OUR actions*.
 It's a "just do it" kind of message—
We just love, without expecting anything in return.

Which can bring up another question—is this us *earning* our *salvation*?
 Is Jesus saying that by helping the needy, we will enter the kingdom of heaven?

Well, consider this part of the story:
 Both the sheep and goats are *SURPRISED* by the Lord's words.
 They *can't believe that the Lord was the one to be found*
 in all 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.
 Or expect anything in return!
 They weren't trying to earn their salvation!
 They *didn't realize it was God* they were serving.
 It was just an act of *LOVE*.

So my friends God is all around us—even in a *homeless* person,
 or a woman on the *side of the road* holding a help sign.
In a person who is sick, or in need of clothing or food.
 Even a *prisoner*!

And what if there's even more to *the least of these*?
 What about seeing God in the person
 who is *most annoying* at work, or school?
 What about serving the person who is *never grateful*,
 Or who is totally *unkind*?

What if this story is also about finding God in the most
unexpected people and places?
 Who would that be *for us, today*?

How many people right beside us are *hungry*,
 for meaning and hope?
 How many strangers need to be *welcomed*?
 How many people are *thirsty* for purpose?
 Or feel *unwell* in their minds and emotions?
 How many are struggling with pain or addiction or loneliness—and are *imprisoned*
 by that pain?

I'm *not saying that Jesus wants us to avoid* those who are
 literally hungry, or naked, sick, or imprisoned.
We need to serve them!
 But can't we *open our eyes* to see *EVERYONE in need* around us?
 How is our *church* doing that?

Because, sometimes the needy are sitting beside us at *church*,
 walking beside us at the *grocery* store,
 maybe at our own *holiday table*.
 What if the *least of these we meet in ordinary, daily life*?

I met a person this week who was *so eager to hear Bible verses*— she had not heard them before, and it was such a gift to her.

Who *are those in need around you?*

And what about those suffering especially after the pandemic?

Do we realize that *suicide is a leading cause* of death in this country?

A recent Surgeon General announced that *loneliness* is a major public health crisis, on par with heart disease or cancer!

Because loneliness is associated with *an increased risk* of heart disease, stroke, premature death, and violence!

Are we *paying attention* to people who are isolated? Or depressed?

Researcher Aaron Kheriaty wrote about

a man in his thirties who died by jumping *off the Golden Gate Bridge* (as more than a thousand other people have done).

After his death, his psychiatrist went with the medical examiner to the man's apartment, where 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*.

Are we paying attention?

Do we lift our eyes, and offer a kind greeting to everyone we encounter?

So often we don't.

In contrast, in the tribes of northern Natal in South Africa,

There is a common greeting, equivalent to "hello" in English: *Sawu bona*.

It literally means, "*I see you.*"

And if you are a member of the tribe,

You would usually reply by saying *Sikhona*, "*I am here.*"

Why? It's because *when you see me, that's when I exist*.

In the book, *Next Door As It Is In Heaven* is this powerful statement:

"When we merely move throughout our days without seeing people as people, then as far as it matters to us in that moment, 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.

Don't we want to bring heaven to our patch of earth?
What if that's the point of Jesus' parable?
We need to *pay attention!*
We need to truly see one another,
And *reach out whenever we feel that nudge* of the Holy Spirit urging us
to call, write, stop by, or simply listen to someone who is hurting.

We are people who love.
We are salt and light.
And hopefully, we are *always looking outward.*

Friends, the *Good News of the Gospel* today is found in Matthew 25.
Whenever we love the least of these,
we love Jesus.
May this body of Christ be people who *always reach out.*
And to that, all God's people said, Amen.