

Living a Love Ethic
Matthew 25:31-46
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
October 22, 2023
Rev. Jill Cameron Michel

So, as we have already heard, today's reading is made up of both verses that we love and are happy to quote time and time again, as well as verses that challenge us and that we push back against.

And you know what I'm talking about...

"For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink..." - this is the stuff we love. These verses have shaped our understanding of faith. We are people who strive to feed and clothe, to pay attention to the needs of others.

But then, within this text, there is also the idea of division and some being punished - even eternally - for what they did not do. That idea doesn't sit so well with most of us.

Additionally, there are all sorts of conversations we can and should have about this text, things that impact our hearing of it.

First, we should remind ourselves that this is not a public sermon to a crowd of thousands, but it is told to be part of a conversation between Jesus and his closest followers, a conversation that also includes the two parables we have heard the last two weeks.

We should remind ourselves that this conversation took place just shortly before Jesus' death, so our hearing should be influenced by the reality that these are among the last things that the gospel writer, Matthew, tells us Jesus said to those closest to him, those most intimately involved in his ministry.

We should also remind ourselves that heaven and hell, as they are conceived among many Christians today, are not what would have come to mind for the Jewish people around Jesus or even for Matthew's community of early Christians.

So there is much that we hear differently than the people around Jesus. There is much that we actually can only guess how they would have heard.

But, what if we listen to this reading and wonder what is at the heart of it. What if we wonder what is it that we should not lose track of? If we ask that, I suspect it takes us back to those most memorable words from this text: when I was hungry, you gave me food...when I was thirsty, you gave me something to drink.

Friends, it can sometimes be easy to just think of our faith as a personal thing, as being about an individual relationship with God. In fact, it can sometimes be desirable to reduce our faith to a question of beliefs that guarantee us a spot in God's eternal kingdom.

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But time and time again we are reminded that faith is not individual, but is relational. Faith is both about our relationship with God and *also* about our relationship with other humans - in fact, these two things are inseparable.

Perhaps, in spite of all the complexity that this passage brings, it is okay that our instinct is to focus on those pivotal verses - "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, 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."

After all, who is God if not love? What is at the core of Jesus' ministry if not love? And isn't that what these verses are all about? Isn't that what we are called to be about? Isn't love to be at the center of our existence?

American author bell hooks talks about this as a "love ethic." She says that a love ethic presupposes that everyone has the right to be free, live fully and well, and that this should be the foundation of our lives and should inform the way we speak and act (bell hooks, *all about love*, 2001).

Doesn't that sound a lot like Jesus?

So, what about us, church?

Over the last several weeks we have heard the statement time and time again: Because of YOU, Our Church Changes Lives. We have been naming how each of us and all of us together make that possible. And that happens in many ways.

Because of YOU, our church changes lives as we feed those who are hungry.

Because of YOU, our church changes lives as we share warm clothing with those who would otherwise be without.

Because of YOU, our church changes lives as we welcome everyone to the table, especially those who the church has previously left out or pushed aside.

Because of YOU, our church changes lives as we create safe spaces for difficult conversations and help teach people that we can be curious and learn and grow even in conversation with people who differ from us.

Because of YOU, our church changes lives as we learn together to separate the things that are about power and domination, things that come from systems of oppression and control that unfortunately have too often become part of organized religion, as we learn to separate these things from the heart and intention of God.

Because of YOU, our church changes lives raising up a generation of people who know that God's love is for all no matter what.

Because of YOU, our church changes lives as we don't wait for children to be the future, but welcome them to lead us and teach us right now.

And all of this is possible because of love.

Friends, today is Commitment Sunday. Today we will bless the commitments made by people connected to First Christian Church. These are commitments in the form of offerings - financial gifts that will support the ministry we share together - and commitments in the form of intentions to serve in ministry because it takes all of us to make the ministry of First Christian possible.

Yes, like any organization, we have a budget. And if you look at the details of that budget you will see line items like utilities and office supplies, staff salaries and ministry funds. But, the gifts we give are not about paying light bills or staff, they are not about buying paper or hosting an intergenerational event, they are not even about the ways that we serve our community beyond this congregation.

No, we are reminded that budgets are theological documents. They tell us something about how we understand God and how we understand who God calls us to be. Budgets, like the one you received in recent weeks, tell the stories of the impact of our ministry. They tell the stories of the ways that we are answering God's call to make a difference in the lives of others. And the ways that we share our resources for this ministry, these are statements of our faith, statements that say that we believe we are called together to make a difference.

Whether it be the meal we will serve next Saturday at the Free Lunch Program, providing over 100 people with a hot meal, or the way we will participate again next summer in the Pridefest telling people who have been hurt by the church that God does in fact love them...

...whether it be the ways we will continue to connect with those who worship with us at a distance or the relationships that begin when you turn to a neighbor in the pew and introduce yourself...

...whether it be the conversations that happen in youth group as teens build relationships and explore their faith or the intensity of faith development that happens each summer in the camp experiences so many of our young people participate in...

...whether it be the honest conversations that happen in small groups or the laughter that is shared over games and activities...

In these ways and more we are invited to continue to change lives, to continue to claim again and again that love matters, to continue to see people - to notice their hearts and their needs and their gifts, to continue to respond to others and in doing so to be the hands and feet of Jesus in this world. Amen.