

“Appropriate Urgency”

There are a lot of things flying around in my head these days. Here’s a partial list: Thanksgiving, the end of one church year and the beginning of a new one, stewardship, pie, Homeless Awareness Day, churches that grow and churches that don’t, encroaching cold weather and our lesson for today. I hope to say something about each of these things, and then to connect the dots. I’ve found that whenever there’s so much going on it’s usually best to start with the scripture lesson; otherwise we might wander off and never find our way home.

Our reading for today comes from Matthew 25. It is the last in a series of teachings from Jesus regarding the end time and the coming Reign of God. We’ve spent three weeks in this chapter. Two weeks ago it was the story of the wise and foolish bridesmaids. Last Sunday Matt preached on the Parable of the Talents. And today, in the last of the teachings we will receive from this teaching-filled gospel, we get a scene of the Last Judgment, an image of what God ultimately cares about.

This is our last lesson from Matthew, because today is the last Sunday in the church year. A new year begins next week with the beginning of Advent. Each year has a gospel all its own in the lectionary. The coming year will be the year of Mark. So this is it for Matthew for a while. None of this, by the way, will be on the test.

Before I comment on this passage and the dramatic scene of judgment it depicts, let me say something directly and unequivocally: Christians are called to care for the poor. God wants us to help feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless (especially with the onset of cold weather), visit the sick and the prisoner. These things represent an important calling we have to share the love of God. That’s why we annually observe Homeless Awareness Day at Plymouth Church.

But this important and godly work is not what this passage is about. I know it seems to say that whenever we care for any unfortunate soul we are caring for Christ himself. I find compelling the idea that God comes to us in the face of a stranger in need. I have read this passage that way. I have preached it that way. But I no longer believe that that is what this passage is about. Why?

Because the scene depicted is a scene of the final judgment in which all the nations of the earth are called before the throne of God, on which the risen Christ in his glory is seated. The nations are to be separated one from another as a shepherd separates sheep from goats. But according to what criteria does this judgment take place? They are judged according to how they treated “the least of these who are members of my family.” The literal Greek for “members of my family” is “brothers.” And the “least of these” relates to a favorite term Matthew uses for converts to the faith. They are called the “little ones.” So “the least of these who are members of my family” are new Christians. The nations are being judged according to how they receive Christian missionaries, the little ones who are sent to them to share the Christian faith.

If you're like me, this is disappointing. I liked this passage better when I thought of it differently. But it really is not, I have come to believe, about feeding, clothing, housing and caring for the anonymous poor... even though these are things we should do.

What this passage says, then, when we step back and take a fresh look at it, is that to God the enterprise of sharing the faith with others is absolutely crucial; so important, in fact, that the nations will be judged according to how they receive Christ's messengers. This emphasis squares with the very end of Matthew's Gospel, a passage we sometimes call the "Great Commissioning," in which the risen Christ shares his very last words with his followers: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." As you wait for the coming Reign of God, make disciples. Share the faith. Baptize and teach. And remember I am always with you... in fact, the nations will be judged according to how they treat you.

This scene of judgment, then, underscores the centrality of reaching out to others in the name of Christ. This work is crucial, and it is one of Christ's top priorities.

Does that set off some alarms? There are lights and buzzers, red flags and barricades, all sorts of warning signs. Share the faith: that's what those obnoxious folks at work are doing. People who do that all the time are invariably self-righteous and pushy: I'm saved, and you're not until you become just like me. This is all about being trapped in an elevator with Ned Flanders, who is just so gosh darn-diddly happy to tell you all about what Jesus has done for him.

I grant you all of that. But take a couple of deep breaths and try to stick with me through this next part. Many of the folks who are so insistent about sharing the faith—and some of them, by the way, are very good at it because some of their churches are growing—do so because of a sense of urgency that they have. They feel strongly about the need to get their message to others because they want to save souls. They believe that anybody who doesn't believe as they do is under the judgment of God and will go to hell when they die. They feel an urgent need to get folks on their side before it's too late, because people haven't gotten the message about God being a stern and strict righteous judge who intends to save just a few and to damn all the rest.

I call this "inappropriate urgency." It's inappropriate because what they've gotten wrong is the message of what God is like. Around here we tend to have a very different image of God, also drawn from the Bible, from tradition and from our own experience. God is love. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. No matter who you are, no matter where you are on life's journey, you are always welcome here. God is still speaking. We are still learning. As Jesus commanded his followers, we are always growing in love of God and neighbor. We agree to differ, we resolve to love, we unite to serve... because this is how we grow in faith as God's people. Does any of that sound familiar? Gosh, I hope so!

We have good news! That scary, vengeful, judgmental God you've heard about is, we believe, a distortion of the heart of the Gospel. The good news is that God's nature is love... and that changes everything. This is a wonderful message.

But here's the thing: we don't seem to feel much urgency about this message. We have lost touch entirely with how much the world needs to hear about God's love and to believe that there are folks sincerely trying to live it out. We seem not to understand how many people there are who are homeless spiritual refugees, abused and battered by their experience with religion; hurting and lonely—sometimes wounded and guilty—without a community to which to belong.

There's an old joke I cite often: what do you get when you cross a Jehovah's Witness with a member of the United Church of Christ? Somebody who knocks on your door and can't think of a thing to say. We have our personal preferences, but not much passion; our opinions, but not much conviction. We're so afraid of imposing ourselves on others that we fail to extend ourselves to others. Well, gosh: didn't they know they would have been welcome?

People who've been around me a lot are sick of hearing this, but here is something I believe with all my heart: there are thousands of people in Des Moines who have stopped looking for a church home because what they desperately need is exactly what we have here at Plymouth; but they have given up in despair because they think such a thing cannot exist: a church where we are challenged to think for ourselves, to live our faith in the world, to extend a welcome to all in the name of Christ.

Many people simply don't believe they would be welcome just as they are. What difference could it make in their lives to have a center of meaning and purpose, a set of spiritual practices such as we teach in Stepping Stones to center their lives and their family's life, meaningful ways to get out of themselves to serve others in the community, a church family to encourage them to grow in faith and in understanding, a place where we don't spoon feed you (or force feed you) theology, but where you can find tools and help to grow in loving God. Don't you think people need this? Can't we find a sense of appropriate urgency about sharing this message of invitation and welcome?

The leaders of the church have been talking for months about the concept of radical hospitality and what we can do to be more inviting to people. We've gotten some great ideas and talked a lot about what more we can do. But the most important thing that's missing is not better signage in the building or more visitor parking or more people wearing nametags or anything like that. What's really missing is our ability to look somebody in the eye and say, "My church has really made a difference in my life. This is a place of comfort and challenge, meaning and inspiration. It gives me roots and wings and I'd love to tell you about it if you're interested." What's missing is a sense of urgency that moves us to say, "Come with me to a concert." "Come to this children's event with me." "Matt's got a great class going that I think you'll like." "Come knit with us." "Come build a house with us." "Come serve at the shelter with us." "Wouldn't your child like to sing in a choir? We'll help with transportation."

Appropriate urgency: thousands of people need this opportunity, not because we're the only true church, but because we are a true church and church matters. Maybe now more than ever, when the economy seems uncertain and the future is scary, church matters. The Lord hath yet more truth and light to break forth from out [God's] holy word, and we need all the truth and light we can get: let's listen for truth together, let's look for light together.

And this is what our stewardship is about, friends. If times are tough and scary, our commitment to the future reminds us that it's God's future, after all. Our commitment to a future together reminds us of what's enduring and what matters, and of the urgency of sharing it with others.

One thing I know for sure: everybody's circumstances are different. We have to trust one another to do what we can; because when we all do what we can, there is more than enough to do God's work; because that's the kind of God we know.

A couple of weeks ago we published some pie charts that told us three basic but important things about the finances of this church.

First of all, we are a generous people. When you take into account all the giving that people do through the church, you see that the annual budget is just a part of the picture, and only a little more than half. People give to special offerings and projects and to capital needs to reduce debt and to all sorts of things. But of all the money that flows through this place, almost all of it represents ongoing giving from people like us.

Secondly, we manage very carefully the resources of this church. We work hard to be responsible stewards, to do collectively what each of us is called to do in our own lives. When those expenses are broken down into the five practices of a fruitful congregation, appropriately allocating staff time and building usage, it's remarkable how balanced we are.

Thirdly, these pies are symbols of something very important: our purposes and priorities as a congregation. They don't stand for pie in the sky by and by, but for how we allocate what has been entrusted to us: first as individual givers, and then collectively as a community of faith.

Symbolizing all of this with pie is a fun way to remember that life is God's gift to us; and what we do with it is our gift to God. Our calling is important. Our ministry is urgent. Our life together is joyous. As God's thankful people let us rejoice in the gift our common life; and let us rededicate ourselves to that calling.

And let's have some pie!

Amen

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