

14th Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 25:31-46

'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. 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, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. 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; 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, 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." 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? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" 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." 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; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 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." 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?" 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." And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'

Last summer, while attending the Presbyterian Youth Triennium, I stopped by the Union Building to visit the exhibition hall to where all things Presbyterian were on display. Like everyone else, I was interested in picking up some "S.W.A.G." (Stuff We All Get).

While walking around, I stopped at one booth setup by the PCUSA Mission Agency. It was centered around a new mission program for our denomination called the "Matthew 25 Ministry". They had a few cool looking SWAG items, so why not learn about what this new ministry was about.

We are all pretty familiar with the words of attributed to Jesus that we read this morning from Matthew 25. This is some of what I learned about this new ministry.

"Matthew 25:31-46 calls all of us to actively engage in the world around us, so our faith comes alive and we wake up to new possibilities. Convicted by this passage, both the 222nd and 223rd General Assemblies (2016 and 2018) exhorted the PC(USA) to act boldly and compassionately to see our neighbors through Jesus' eyes and serve those who are marginalized or in need — people

who are hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, imprisoned, strangers, poor or oppressed in other ways and in need of welcoming.

This work is a direct response to the good news of Jesus and a faithful expression of what it means to be Christ's disciples in this time and place.

The themes of the Matthew 25 invitation are grounded in the Gospel. Jesus calls us to serve with and for "the least of these" — not as a group to be pitied, but as people who are deeply loved by Jesus.

There are three areas of focus for churches who wish to become a Matthew 25 congregation. A church can choose to focus on one or all three. They are:

1. Building congregational vitality by challenging people and congregations to deepen their faith and get actively and joyfully engaged with their community and the world.
2. Dismantling structural racism by advocating and acting to break down the systems, practices and thinking that underlie discrimination, bias, prejudice and oppression of people of color.
3. Eradicating systemic poverty by working to change laws, policies, plans and structures in our society that perpetuate economic exploitation of people who are poor.

There are already PC(USA) congregations that identify themselves as Matthew 25 churches.

Here in the Madison area of John Knox Presbytery, we have three congregations who have already pledged to be a "Matthew 25" church: First Presbyterian in Oregon, Union Pres in Monroe, and Westminster in Madison.

Pastor Stacy Cavanaugh and the congregation at Union in prayerfully deciding to participate in this new mission, asked themselves "Are we doing enough in our community?" After studying and reflecting together on the "Matthew 25" Mission Study, they felt called to do more. They chose to focus on "Building congregational vitality by challenging people and congregations to deepen their faith and get actively and joyfully engaged with their community and the world." To that end, they have...

Pastor Kathleen Owen and the members at First Presbyterian in Oregon feel like it has helped them connect what they are doing in ministry and mission locally with the denomination as a whole. One of the things they have undertaken to address how they as a congregation can work to help dismantle structural racism which still exists in our churches today." To that end, they are engaging in a Bible Study of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous "Letter From the Birmingham Jail."

The people of First Presbyterian Church are accepting the challenge to work to dismantle structural racism in their congregation and the larger Church.

Pastor Scott Anderson and the members of Westminster in choosing to become a Matthew 25 congregation are focusing on "Eradicating systemic poverty".

Westminster is located on Nakoma Ave. in Madison. While situated in a more affluent neighborhood, they are located near Thoreau and Cherokee schools, both of which have a high percentage of underserved students living in poverty and facing food scarcity. Westminster, partnering with other Allied-Dunn Neighbor Churches, including Glenwood Moravian, where Staci serves, has turned their fellowship hall into collection and food distribution site, which is especially needed during the pandemic.

They see the effects of poverty not only on the students, but their families, and our schools. In response, they are working collectively to meet the daily needs of students, but also working to change the economic and political structures that continue to oppress people in the growing economic disparities.

So what about us? How might we serve "The Least of These" through one or all three of these areas of ministry of justice and mercy here in the Cambridge area?

In reflecting further on the Matthew 25 passage, the PCUSA Mission Agency writes:

"It has been said that 'character is what you do when no one is looking.' The compassionate nature of the sheep in Matthew 25 reveals the authenticity of their character. They are not trying to impress Jesus or earn their way into the kingdom through their works. They are simply responding compassionately when they encounter people in need."

To which "Cornel West states that 'that justice is what love looks like in public.' Indeed, Jesus and justice go together as two sides of one coin. Matthew 25 suggests that a special blessing is pronounced for those who are transformed by God's love and who love and serve others in Jesus' name. If the purpose of Jesus' stories is to transform those who learn from them, then the good news in this story is that goats can become sheep. We still have time to get our act together. Transformation is possible for those who recognize what Jesus is saying and understand where God is coming from — God's kingdom. It our hope that the PC(USA) will align with the sheep so we may be transformed and become agents of transformation through Jesus Christ.

If "Following Jesus faithfully means putting Christian love and compassion into action" then how might our committing ourselves as a Matthew 25 congregation deepen our faith in Christ, and extend our ministry of justice and mercy in our community and world?

Amen.