

Matthew 25:31-46

“When you did it to the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you did it to me.”

As you read this sermon which mentions two historic statements of faith made by the Presbyterian Church in 1967 (Confession of 1967) and the South African churches in 1986 (Belhar Confession), I invite you to reflect on the following questions:

- What is required of a church to take a stand in times of crisis?
- How can a faith statement that takes a stand create change for good in the world?
- For whom or what would you take a stand in the middle of the cafeteria or at school? In the middle of the congregation? On the streets of your community? In your nation?
- Against what evil or injustice in the world would you write a faith statement?
- How would you then live out that statement of faith through your daily life and the ministry of your church?

“Where is Christ Leading Us in 2022?”

In 1968, we lived in North Jackson, Ohio. My father, Jim Wheeler, was the pastor of the First Federated Church.

Many of you remember the events of that year from Woodstock to the anti-war protests to the Civil Rights Movement to the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr.

In between the assassination of Dr. King in April and Bobby Kennedy’s assassination in June, my father attended as a commissioner to the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church held in Minneapolis that year in May.

Given all that was happening in our nation, the United Presbyterian Church (OCPC was a member of this denomination) had written the Confession of 1967. The message of this Confession focused on the reconciling work in Jesus Christ and the church’s mission of reconciliation which is at the heart of the Gospel.

The Confession of 1967 addressed the divisive issues of racial injustices, women’s rights, war, poverty, and other social issues dividing our nation.

The Confession of 1967 opened with these words: **“In Jesus Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself. Jesus Christ is God with humankind. He is the eternal Son of the Father, who became human**

and lived among us to fulfill the work of reconciliation. He is present in the church by the power of the Holy Spirit to continue and complete his mission. This work of God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is the foundation of all confessional statements about God, humanity, and the world. Therefore, the church calls all people to be reconciled to God and to one another."

While these words about reconciliation might not seem divisive, they were to a more conservative as were some of the positions taken at the 1968 General Assembly.

At the end of this contentious Assembly, my father, knew that many pastors would, like himself, receive letters, telegrams and phone calls from "irate members" who would threaten to withhold their financial support, leave the church and/or fire the minister, because they supported these positions.

Given all of this, my father in his report back to the congregation and presbytery, reflectively asked this question: **"The actions of this body certainly asks us where is Christ going in 1968?"**

He then offers his thoughtful, and for me, powerful faith response with these words, words that challenged those who heard them: **"For one thing, I am sure he is going where persons are; where their hungers and heartaches are; where their loneliness and longings are; where their hostilities and hatreds tear them apart. Christ is going where their needs cry louder than their protests. He goes to persons in their need and he goes not empty-handed. He goes to the hungry with food, to the lonely with love, to the sick with healing, to the sinful with forgiveness, to the feeble with strength, to the defeated with victory and to the dead with life. Where people cry out for (justice and) freedom, Christ is there. Where the exploited (and oppressed) lie crushed, he is there with dignity and honor. To follow Christ (him) means to go where he goes, do what he does, serves as he serves, love as he loves. A Christian will do all these things."**

I wish I could have had some conversation with him about his words that he used in his report back to his congregation and presbytery. I did not. My father died 23 years ago yesterday.

For me, his words speak to our passage from Matthew 25 - of our call to see the Christ in even the most vulnerable among us, and provide for their needs.

In 2019, the Presbyterian Church (USA) Mission Agency began a new ministry of reconciliation and justice called The Matthew 25 Project. Again, my father's words speak to what this new ministry emphasis is about.

Recalling his words from those contentious times, reading the Matthew 25 passage, and reflecting on the Matthew 25 Project, I was looking back on

my own experiences that called me further into Christ's work of love, justice and reconciliation.

Probably the most important one in my young ministry happened in the spring of 1986. I was still new to the ministry, serving my first congregation in Peotone, Illinois.

The Methodist minister invited me to join him at a breakfast gathering being held at the Conrad Hilton in Chicago for faith leaders.

As we ate breakfast, the dignitaries arrived. First was Jessie Jackson followed by Chicago Mayor Harold Jackson. Both were surrounded by their entourage. After they were seated, our guest of honor arrived. He walked in by himself, this tiny man, carrying the weight of oppression and injustice of his nation, South Africa, on his shoulders. We had come to hear what we as faith leaders could do to help stop apartheid. He came to tell us about what was happening in South Africa to end apartheid and to encourage us to pray. He was a powerful presence and one who stirred in me my passion for social justice and hope!

As the Presbyterians had done in 1967, the churches of South Africa, in 1986, came together to formulate a new confession which also addressed the racial tensions, oppression and evils of apartheid. It is called the Confession of Belhar.

Both are found in our Book of Confessions. I have had small portions printed in the bulletin for you to prayerfully read and reflect on.

My dad's question following the 1968 General Assembly, is still one worth asking ourselves today: "Where is Christ going - in 2022?"

And his response is still one we, who profess to be followers of Christ, members of the Church, this church or any church need to remember, and ask ourselves - "Where is Christ going in 2022?"

The same place Christ went in 1968, the same place Christ went in 1986, and the same place he went in First Century Jerusalem and Galilee.

Into the streets of our communities joining our voices in crying out for racial justice, seeking to end systemic racism by addressing the economic and racial inequalities still plaguing our nations; feeding the hungry and creating policies that address food scarcity in our society; providing free medical care for everyone, addressing the disparity in adequate housing, defending women's health and reproductive rights, welcoming the immigrant and stranger, bringing freedom for those long abused, oppressed and beaten down by government and economic systems, and calling all of us, who profess to follow him, to join him in these ministries of justice and reconciliation.

Bishop Desmond Tutu, who died on December 23, 2021, said: **“If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.”**

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. says: “In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.”

Haile Selassie **“Throughout history, it has been the inaction of those who could have acted; the indifference of those who should have known better; the silence of the voice of justice when it mattered most; that has made it possible for evil to triumph.”**

Reflecting on my father’s question and words, recalling Bishop Desmond Tutu’s life work to end apartheid and freedom for black Afrikaans, and remembering the ministry of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the One who they each served, Jesus Christ, I would invite us as a congregation to sign on to become a Matthew 25 Congregation in 2022, and ask ourselves in doing so, “Where is Christ leading us to go in 2022?”

Amen

Here is an additional story that Bishop Desmond Tutu told about a defining moment in his life:

“Asked by the BBC to identify the defining moment in his life Desmond Tutu spoke of the day he and his mother were walking down the street. Tutu was nine years old. A tall white man dressed in a black suit came towards them. In the days of apartheid in South Africa, when a black person and a white person met while walking on a footpath, the black person was expected to step into the gutter to allow the white person to pass and nod their head as a gesture of respect. But this day, before a young Tutu and his mother could step off the sidewalk the white man stepped off the sidewalk and, as they passed, he tipped his hat in a gesture of respect to her!

“The white man was Trevor Huddleston, an Anglican priest who was bitterly opposed to apartheid. It changed Tutu’s life. When his mother told him that Trevor Huddleston had stepped off the sidewalk because he was a ‘man of God,’ Tutu found his calling. ‘When she told me that he was an Anglican priest I decided there and then that I wanted to be an Anglican priest too. And what is more, I wanted to be a man of God,’ said Tutu.

Huddleston later became a mentor to Desmond Tutu and his commitment to the equality of all human beings due to their creation in God’s image a key driver in Tutu’s opposition to apartheid.”

For your further reflection on the Confession of 1967 and the Belhar Confession of 1986, ask yourself the following questions:

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