

"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. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴Then 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; ³⁵for 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, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' ³⁷Then 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? ³⁸And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' ⁴⁰And 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, ^[a] you did it to me.'

⁴¹Then 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; ⁴²for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³I 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.' ⁴⁴Then 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?' ⁴⁵Then 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.' ⁴⁶And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

FIRST READING: James 2:14-17

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What good is it, my brothers and sisters, ^[a] if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? ¹⁵If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, ¹⁶and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? ¹⁷So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

“Mark #6 Outward Incarnational Focus”

An interesting and somewhat providential thing happened to me this week. I was called to officiate at the memorial service of a man I did not know but whose family wanted a Presbyterian pastor for the service. The experience got me to start thinking about times when I had done similar things in the past.

I recalled the life story of a woman whose funeral I preached nearly 15 years ago. Even as a child, following the death of her mother, this woman had shown interests in social justice and reform. It probably began, her daughters told me, with her late-night discussions with her housekeepers and caregivers. By the time she was a young adult, she was volunteering as a teacher of children of immigrant farmworkers in rural California. And once she became a licensed social worker, she found herself drawn to work with the mentally afflicted in the State hospital, with families in crisis in a Family Practice Center, with disabled babies born into homes with terrible violence, and with families who had no where to turn when their children died upon birth. It was NOT at all hard for me as a preacher to see that she lived her life serving as did her Savior in the world. She had been Jesus’ body, his hands and feet, his mouth, his eyes and heart in the world...although, her family agreed, she may have been very surprised to have been told so. *(repeat)*

This is the case with the sheep in the parable, the 3rd of three, that Jesus tells during his last week of life on earth as recorded here in the Gospel of Matthew. Actually, it is the case with the goats as well. The sheep and the goats, representative of people from the nations of the world, are both surprised by what Jesus says. *“Lord, when did we...?”* and *“when didn’t we...?”*, they say. Now, it is not their behavior that surprises them. The sheep, (who Jesus says will inherit the Kingdom), know that they’ve acted in a righteous way by feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, and visiting the imprisoned, and the goats, (who are judged by Jesus harshly), know that they are acting in an unrighteous way by neglecting the same. Yet, they ARE both surprised. Why? Because they fail to recognize that in these, the

hungry, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned, the Son of Man is. David Lose says, “In these, Jesus “hangs out,”¹

I suppose most of us, from the time we are young, are conditioned to think of God in terms of power and might and glory and just “awesomeness”. And in truth, our God is all of these things. God is beyond all power and might. God is the Creator and Master of the Universe and scripture tells us that God is seated on his throne in glory, attended by angels. Yet this same Almighty One makes effort to tell us that he identifies with “the least of these”. He redirects our tendency to look for God in places of great wealth and power. He is, after all, the One who came as a vulnerable baby, born of a poor peasant girl in a cold stable...and He is the One who came to conquer the sin of the world through death on a Roman cross.

The sheep and the goats are surprised by where the Son of Man hangs out. They, also, it seems, are very surprised that the criterium for judgment is so simple: “*Just as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me,*” Jesus says. I agree with Rev. John Buchanan that this too is very different from what most of us have been conditioned to from the time we were young. There is a total absence of the moralism that many of us were taught was of prime importance to God...no concerns about “sex” or smoking or drinking or dancing or shopping on Sunday here. Of course, there are no comments about doctrine, creeds, baptism or church membership either. Nothing about speaking in tongues or conversion experiences. (Nothing said against them, of course, but the criterium for salvation, what seems so important here, is that we are to be held accountable for our treatment of the least of these...and simply that.²

(*pause*). Ultimately, all of this, friends, means that if we want to experience God’s presence fully, deeply and truly, we need look for God in the need of those around us, our neighbors, who are “the most marginalized, the poor, the imprisoned, the sick, the old and weak. As David Lose says, “*We are invited to meet God not in some distant eternal life or other-worldly reality but here and now... We meet God in the Other.*” BUT also, we meet God in the acts of mercy and care and compassion we offer too. “*We live in the blessing of God as we seek to*

¹ David Lose. “*Christ the King A: The Unexpected God.*” <https://www.davidlose.net/2014/11/christ-the-king-a/> (accessed 3-13-2020).

² John Buchanan. “*The Least of These*”. <https://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2008/111608.html>. (accessed 3-13-2020).

*serve, as did he,” Rev Lose says.*³ This is what has attracted people to the Christian movement from its very, very beginning, when Christians supported orphans and widows, when they cared for and visited prisoners, or when they buried the dead that no one claimed. It has been that way ever since.

I love the story told by Jim Wallis, editor of Sojourners magazine and founder of an inner-city ministry in DC. *It’s about Mary Glover. She is a volunteer at the weekly food distribution center in Wallis’ organization. Mary is poor herself, but she is there every Saturday to help. In fact, Mary is the one who says the prayer for the volunteers before the center opens. “She prays,” Jim says, “like someone who knows to whom she is talking.” “It’s worth getting out of bed on Saturday just to hear Mary pray”. With a long line of hungry, needy people waiting outside in all kinds of weather, Mary prays this way, “Lord, we know you’ll be comin’ through this line today, so Lord, help us to treat you well.”*⁴ This reminds me of Mother Theresa’s famous words when asked how she could love the sick and dying of Calcutta. She said, *“I see Jesus in every human being. I say to myself, ‘This is hungry Jesus, I must feed him. This is sick Jesus. This Jesus has leprosy or gangrene; I must wash him and tend to him.”*⁵

Friends, what we’re talking about here is our 5th mark of Vital Congregations Initiative, Outward Incarnational Focus, a big title, which might be more easily said as, “intentionally living as Jesus’ body in the world”. The vital marks which we have been considering thus far are ones which really have much to do with us as a church gathered (life-long discipleship, ecclesial health, empowering servant leadership, spirit inspired worship, caring relationships), but this mark really pushes us out to examine ourselves as a church scattered...out of these walls, out there! And you know, FPC-CC has always done well in this regard. We’ve been a very outwardly focused church, going back to our very beginnings when FPC established the first day care center in CC and served as the ministerial alliance’s community food pantry.

³ David Lose.

⁴ Jim Wallis quoted in John Buchanan.

⁵ <https://aleteia.org/2015/12/20/10-inspiring-quotes-from-mother-teresa/> (accessed 3-15-20).

Now, it seems we are busier than ever, buying cows for a village in Africa, making blankets for babies in Zambia, and sandwiches for the homeless and hungry in our area. We make hygiene kits for those who've undergone crises such as a hurricane, and we fill back-packs for children in need. We offer monthly worship services at a nearby assisted living center and collect dog/cat supplies for the local shelters. And the list goes on and on. We give nearly 11% of our income directly to mission giving through these and our 4 PCUSA offerings. This helps many people, and must be so pleasing to the Lord.

However, it seems to me, we need not ever take our eye off the ball. We need always look for ways to do hands-on projects for they provide such impact to the giver and we need always look for projects which wisely take donations farther than their individual amounts...matching grants, for instance. But, as a church, we need always remember we are charged with nurturing souls, and caring for others is a behavior for which we are held accountable. Not to mention that "the more the merrier." There's plenty of joy to go around.

In closing, I want to simply remind you that while there is always opportunity in our broken world to serve the least of these, with our current coronavirus crisis, the greatest need may be right here. Right here where we cannot physically wrap our arms around the other, we can be the loving embrace of God to them. *(pause)* There will likely be many homebound. Card ministries and phone ministries will become very important. Transportation and delivery services may be life-saving for some. We can help. It will be the face of Jesus that we minister to when we care for them. Those that are at the margins, the homeless, the poor, the abandoned, the elderly, society's invisibles, may suffer greatly as social networks get even more stressed. Helping to navigate the confusion may make all the difference. We can be there. It will be the face of Jesus that we minister to. Those who may be closest to us, our spouse, our children, our elderly parents, our friends, may be the ones who get sick or are frightened or lonely. They may need us to be ministers of presence and compassion as they look Jesus back to us.. All in all, we need in these difficult times to be observant and wise, willing and at the ready. May our prayer be..."*Lord, we know you'll be comin' across our path today. So Lord, help us to treat you well.*" Amen.