

I CAN DO THAT!

Psalm 100
Matthew 25: 31-46

Faith Community
November 20, 2011

Introduction

Several years ago we did a book discussion of Rick Warren's very popular book, "The Purpose-Driven Life." In many ways it is a summary of the Christian faith. The book encourages people to take their faith seriously and also to share it with others.

I was astounded, though, to find that Rick Warren never mentions this passage from Matthew 25. As you have just heard it has to do with how we are judged as Christians. It deals with eternal matters. We might ask ourselves, how can you seriously talk about what it means to be Christian and not address these words of Jesus?

This omission seems to happen a lot. As important as this passage is, many people have never heard about it. We all know the comforting words of the twenty third Psalm. Most people have heard about God's love in John 3:16. (If you watch any sports, you have at least seen a sign saying, "John 3:16"!). We know well these words about God's comfort and God's love. Do fewer of us know these important words from Matthew 25 because they are more demanding? The passages about love and comfort are extremely important, and it is crucial that we know them. It is also important that we understand the challenges that our faith offers us.

I think I was in seminary before I really became familiar with what Jesus is saying in this scripture reading. That's a shame because these words tell us so much about our faith. And, in their own way they are also words of comfort - as we'll see later.

I

These words of Jesus indicate that each one of us will be accountable for how we have lived our lives. Judgment will be made about how we've used what we've been given. One of the important aspects of that judgment will concern what we have done as well as what we have failed to do. Jesus praises those who have responded to need with compassion. Those who are condemned are judged because they saw real human need and did nothing about it. Or maybe they didn't even notice it at all. Our blindness to the plight of others can be a judgment against us.

In the end each of us will be held accountable for how we treat other people, and especially those who are most in need.

II

In this judgment scene there is a huge contrast. Christ the king comes in all his glory. He is surrounded by angels and comes to sit on the high, royal throne. The image is of great majesty, wondrous pageantry, and the highest royalty. Then the king begins to speak, and it is about "The least of these:" the poor, homeless, beggars, and destitute. The one who holds ultimate power and authority says we are judged by how we treat the powerless, those without authority. Christ the king identifies with the lowly, forgotten people.

This image shows us that our God is not an abstract theoretical entity, but a God who cares about our day-to-day lives. God is not removed from us but involved in the grittiness, confusion, and ambiguity of daily living. This is truly God with us.

It reminds us that Jesus said, "I have come not to be served, but to serve." We are to follow Jesus' lead; we have not been born to be served, but to serve. Especially in these words Jesus calls us to step outside of ourselves to be there for other people.

Today we see the reign of God not so much in spectacular miracles as in ordinary acts of compassion, mercy, and justice. The all-powerful God cares about how we treat those considered least among us.

III

When we hear that a wealthy person has made a large contribution to a school or hospital we immediately think, that was a generous thing to do. Bill Gates is frequently giving away huge amounts of money. Although, when you look carefully at how much a billion dollars is a million dollars can be just one month's interest. If you had a billion dollars - just one - and you invested it very conservatively you could give away one million dollars every month and still have your billion left at the end of the year. Often huge gifts by wealthy people don't involve nearly as much sacrifice as smaller gifts by average earners.

But for us, as Christians, it's not really a question of whether to be generous or not.

I think one of the points Jesus is making is that if we are Christian we don't have a choice about helping people in need. To put it bluntly: it's required. In our reading today those who fail to help the hungry, naked, homeless, and strangers are condemned.

It's not that we are hugely generous when we give to people who need, we are simply doing what is asked of us. Remember Jesus words, "Those to whom much is given, much is required." Not "much would be appreciated", or "much is expected", but much is required.

All this ties together with Jesus summary of the Christian faith when he said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love you neighbor as yourself." Withholding is not an option. Giving is generous, but it is also required.

IV

Did you notice in this account that both those who cared for people and those who failed to were surprised that Jesus identified with the needy? The ones who were accepted ask, "When did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink?" They had no idea that caring for people in need was the same as caring for Christ.

Those who turn a blind eye to people in need were just as startled: "When was it that we saw you a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and didn't care for you?"

So those who have been caring for the needy aren't doing it to rack up points or build up credits for themselves; they didn't even know their actions counted. They weren't trying to earn their way into God's grace, but through the life they live - by God's grace - they are doing what's important. They don't act to help other people out of guilt or threats or promises, but they spontaneously care about another person's well-being.

And when they look into the eyes of those people grappling with the hardships of life, they see the eyes of Christ. This is true because God stands with those who are struggling or oppressed. Remember last week we talked about God standing with Hagar when she was mistreated by Abraham and Sarah? These words of Jesus seem to be an extension of what we talked about last week. God stands beside those who are having a difficult time.

It is an astounding thought: we can see Jesus today in the faces of the people we help. Caring for someone who is suffering is the same as caring for Jesus Christ.

V

A weekly Bible study group met at a major university. Each week they dealt with a different passage of scripture. One week they read this passage from Matthew 25. Just as the leader finished reading it one of the students blurted out, "I can do that!" The others turned and looked at him. He said, "I have been thinking all along that in order to serve Jesus I had to become a missionary in Africa or a martyr or something like that. But I can feed people, I can help homeless people. I have time to visit people in prison."

Sometimes faith can seem overwhelming. It might feel like we can never do enough or sacrifice enough to be worthy of God. But here Jesus is saying that how we treat ordinary people who are having difficulty is what matters. Anybody can do that. Helping a little bit is no small thing. Giving a small portion of our income is no small gift.

Jesus reassures us that each one of us can participate in the kingdom of God. It doesn't take huge acts of heroic courage, we only need a caring heart. We don't have to make horrendous sacrifices, our simple acts of kindness are enough. We don't have to achieve extraordinary things, our common caring is what counts.

Jesus said at one point, "Whoever offers a cup of cool water to one of the least of these...will receive a reward." We can offer a cup of cool water. What Christ asks of us, any of us can do.

Conclusion

We are judged by God according to how we respond to the people around us. Simple caring such as giving food to a hungry man, welcoming a child who is new, or helping the woman who doesn't speak our language is important to God. Jesus tells us that how we relate to those around us who are hurting affects how we relate to him.

What Christ asks of us is not impossible. It's not really all that difficult: some bread and water, a warm welcome, a visit to the hospital or prison, offering a coat or shirt. When we care for people in need we are caring for Jesus himself. Even our small acts of compassion are considered generous. What we might not even give a second thought to, God sees as valuable.

I was at a conference once with a preacher named Thomas Troeger, who teaches at Yale. He finished his talk one day by saying something that has stayed with me ever since I heard it. He said, "At the end of my days, when I stand before my God, I am quite certain that God will not say to me, 'Tom, you were too generous.'"

Amen