

“Remembering The Least of These”

The Rev. Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages, FL
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24th Sun. after Pentecost
Thanksgiving Sunday

Ephesians 1:15-23

Matt. 25:31-46

[Jesus said,]

“Then the king will say to those on his right,

‘Come, you who will receive good things from my Father.

Inherit the kingdom that was prepared for you before the world began.

I was hungry and you gave me food to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me a drink.

I was a stranger and you welcomed me...”

Matt. 25:34a, 35

Let us pray... O God,

Show us those who might otherwise be overlooked in the midst of our society
and in the midst of our lives, who are deserving of our respect and love
just for being people and for being like you.

Amen

Today’s Gospel lesson is not a parable like other parables;

It does not tell us what God’s Kingdom of Heaven ‘is like’,

but presents the coming of that Kingdom

as something that will happen.

Do you believe that Jesus as the Son of Man,

will come to judge all the people of the world?

Should we just simply believe this without question,

or dismiss this story as a morality tale about loving your neighbor?

A key insight for how I understand this story to be true,

came about like this...

Having taken an introductory course on art therapy,

I applied for an “Art Therapist” position that opened

at Greystone Park State Psychiatric Hospital in Morris Plains, NJ.

I didn’t have enough training for that specific position,

but was hired as an Assistant Supervisor for Recreation –

where I could still do art-based programs.

I was assigned to 50 Ellis – a three floor building which had

a women’s ward on the first floor, a co-ed ward with some deaf patients

on the second floor, and a men’s ward on the third floor.

During my orientation, I was taken to each of these wards

to get familiar with the facility and the resident patients.

They were relatively ‘high functioning’ adults,

generally diagnosed as either manic-depressive or schizophrenic.

Willard, p.2

Although the work there had its daily dangers and frustrations,
I look back at my time at Greystone as very satisfying –
even joyful at times, though I was glad to move on when I did.
There were many occasions for spiritual insights –
some terrible, but for the most part affirming our common humanity.
My first time on the men's ward, though, provided the basis
for how I would approach my work there over the next 4 and a half years...

The building manager of 50 Ellis was showing me around
along with others recently hired for the Recreation Department.
We hadn't yet received our keys – which was always a comfort later on,
especially when you heard the *ka-jung* of heavy doors locking behind you.

We were guided into an open dayroom that had cable TV going
and a few residents were sitting or standing around.
I was introduced to a patient named Greg who had black hair streaked with gray
that he wore long, and he *talked like this* [Jersey accent].
To my left, the TV was on with a lurid talk show, vying for my attention,
while I strained to listen to Greg who chatted on and on and on.
Then, the building manager came over and said,
'OK, let's go,' as he snapped off the TV.
Then, Greg said to me,
'Thank you for listening to me.'
What a terrible thing for an adult to have to say.
In a flash, I understood what my job would be there...

It wouldn't matter *what* I did, but what would matter was that
I should take these psychiatric patients seriously
as human beings on a hard journey.
The games, leisure walks, and art projects I would do there at 50 Ellis
would just be an excuse to interact with these residents
as people who deserved my respect.
It was like Christ standing there saying,
"When you've done it for the least of these, you've done it for me."

This experience has helped me to understand today's Gospel lesson as a reminder
to look passed the label of 'stranger' that we often give to others
and see them – not only as being like us,
but even as Christ himself in disguise, God in human-form.

Willard, p.3

We as a church over the past two months have had opportunities –
through our educational and worship events,
to be exposed to people of groups often portrayed as strangers.
We have been reminded to take seriously the least of these –
the minority in our midst, as people deserving of respect.

Perhaps you didn't know of the challenges regularly faced by the LGBT community
before our panel discussion about their civil rights.
Perhaps you never met someone from the migrant farm-worker community –
which include undocumented immigrants,
before meeting our guests from Dade City on Harvest Sunday.
Perhaps you never met a black Muslim before – or one who was as charming
and talented a singer as Imam Wilmore Sadiki.
Perhaps you have not previously made the acquaintance of our Jewish friends
from just up the street at Temple Shalom who also came to
the Community Thanksgiving Service this week.

There's more ahead as we plan an Angel Tree Party
for the children of prisoners' families.
We will also host a film and discussion series as part of
the UCC's 'Sacred Conversation on Race' initiative.
These are all activities that have given us an opportunity
to meet people of groups that are at the heart of many current events issues.
We are reminded that the least of these – the minority in our midst,
are people we should care about, even as we love Christ.
From the Jewish people and their tradition,
we know the name of God to be 'I Am That I Am' –
God is that 'I am' that we are, too, being created in God's image.
The love of God, then, directs us back to love others and ourselves, as well.

Just as we should get to know and love others who are 'strangers',
we need to get to know each other better beyond Sunday mornings.
We need to strengthen our connections with each other that begin with
greeting those you don't know at the "Passing of the Peace" and coffee hour.
This should be a start for us all to network with each other
and to take advantage of our Shepherds 'Called to Care Program'.
When you know somebody, it changes everything from an objective debate
about the issues of the day, to making a real difference in peoples' lives.
Jesus said, 'Remember me',
and when we do, we are reminded to care for others – or else!
How we treat the most vulnerable people,
will be how we will be judged both in this world and the next.

Willard, p.4

In the process, we discover that the greatness of God – the Glory of God
cannot be contained by any one perspective.

Those insights that come from moments of grace along the way
build into a broader perspective.

From our vantage point as Christians, it is to see God through Christ –
the healing of brokenness and the celebration of human diversity
by remembering the least of these.

Oh, and thank you for listening to me...

Amen

*Our lesson today from Ephesians 1:15-23,
describes Jesus in the Heavenly realm as Lord over all,
and at the same time the Church is the body of Christ...*

[The Apostle Paul said,]

[15] Since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus
and your love for all God's people, this is the reason that

[16] I don't stop giving thanks to God for you
when I remember you in my prayers.

[17] I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory,
will give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation

that makes God known to you.

[18] I pray that the eyes of your heart will have enough light
to see what is the hope of God's call,

what is the richness of God's glorious inheritance among believers,

[19] and what is the overwhelming greatness of God's power
that is working among us believers.

This power is conferred by the energy of God's powerful strength.

[20] God's power was at work in Christ when God raised him from the dead
and sat him at God's right side in the heavens,

[21] far above every ruler and authority and power and angelic power,
any power that might be named not only now but in the future.

[22] God put everything under Christ's feet
and made him head of everything in the church,

[23] which is his body.

His body, the church, is the fullness of Christ,
who fills everything in every way.

Let us be guided and challenged by these words...

Matt. 25:31-46

- 31 “Now when the Human One comes in his majesty and all his angels are with him, he will sit on his majestic throne.
- 32 All the nations will be gathered in front of him.
He will separate them from each other,
just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.
- 33 He will put the sheep on his right side. But the goats he will put on his left.
- 34 “Then the king will say to those on his right,
‘Come, you who will receive good things from my Father.
Inherit the kingdom that was prepared for you
before the world began.
- 35 I was hungry and you gave me food to eat.
I was thirsty and you gave me a drink.
I was a stranger and you welcomed me.
- 36 I was naked and you gave me clothes to wear.
I was sick and you took care of me.
I was in prison and you visited me.’
- 37 “Then those who are righteous will reply to him,
‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you,
or thirsty and give you a drink?
- 38 When did we see you as a stranger and welcome you,
or naked and give you clothes to wear?
- 39 When did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’
- 40 “Then the king will reply to them,
‘I assure you that when you have done it for one of the least of these
brothers and sisters of mine, you have done it for me.’
- 41 “Then he will say to those on his left,
‘Get away from me, you who will receive terrible things.
Go into the unending fire that has been prepared
for the devil and his angels.
- 42 I was hungry and you didn’t give me food to eat.
I was thirsty and you didn’t give me anything to drink.
- 43 I was a stranger and you didn’t welcome me.
I was naked and you didn’t give me clothes to wear.
I was sick and in prison, and you didn’t visit me.’
- 44 “Then they will reply,
‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger
or naked or sick or in prison and didn’t do anything to help you?’
- 45 Then he will answer,
‘I assure you that when you haven’t done it for one of the least of these,
you haven’t done it for me.’
- 46 And they will go away into eternal punishment.
But the righteous ones will go into eternal life.”

Inspired by Matthew 25:31-46

“SOMEDAY, THE SON OF MAN, THE TRUE HEIR OF HUMANITY
WILL SHOW UP IN GOD’S GLORY, ACCOMPANIED BY ALL THE ANGELIC BEINGS.
AT THAT TIME THIS ONE WILL BE SEATED UPON A RADIANT THRONE
AND GATHERED UP IN THIS ONE’S PRESENCE WILL BE PEOPLE OF EVERY ETHNICITY.
AND EVERY INDIVIDUAL WILL BE SEPARATED, ONE FROM ANOTHER,
JUST LIKE A SHEPHERD SORTS OUT THE SHEEP FROM THE GOATS.
AND WAITING ON ONE HAND
WILL BE THE ‘LAMBS’ WHO ARE SELF-RIGHTEOUS
AND ON THE OTHER, THE ‘SCAPEGOATS’ WHO ARE LEFT.

BUT THIS MIGHTY ONE WILL SAY TO THOSE WHO ARE ‘IN THE RIGHT’,
“WELCOME, DEAREST OF MY HEAVENLY GUARDIAN!
RECEIVE THE INHERITANCE OF BELOVED COMMUNITY PREPARED FOR YOU
FROM SEEDS SOWN SINCE THE BEGINNING OF THE WORLD!
FOR I WAS HUNGRY AND YOU GAVE ME FOOD TO EAT,
I WAS THIRSTY AND YOU GAVE ME WATER,
I WAS A STRANGER AND YOU WELCOMED ME,
I WAS HOMELESS AND YOU SHELTERED ME,
I WAS HOME-BOUND AND YOU VISITED ME,
I WAS IN PRISON AND YOU RESCUED ME.”

THEN, THOSE WHO ARE ‘IN THE RIGHT’ WILL ANSWER, SAYING,
“LORD, WHEN DID WE SEE YOU HUNGRY AND FEED YOU
OR THIRSTY AND GIVE YOU WATER?
AND WHEN DID WE SEE YOU A STRANGER AND WELCOME YOU
OR HOMELESS AND SHELTER YOU?
AND WHEN DID WE SEE YOU HOMEBOUND
OR IN PRISON AND COME TO YOU?”

AND THE MIGHTY ONE WILL ANSWER, SAYING TO THEM,
“I TELL YOU THE TRUTH,
IN AS MUCH AS YOU HELPED MY BROTHERS AND SISTERS
WHO ARE THE LEAST OF THESE –
THE MINORITY IN YOUR MIDST, YOU HELPED ME.”

THEN, THIS MIGHTY ONE WILL SAY TO THOSE WHO ARE ‘LEFT’,
“BEGONE FROM ME!
BE CONDEMNED TO THE FIRES OF TRUTH
PREPARED FOR THE DECEIVER
AND THAT ONE’S SERVANT LIARS!
FOR I WAS HUNGRY AND YOU GAVE ME NO FOOD TO EAT,
THIRSTY AND YOU GAVE ME NOTHING TO DRINK,
A STRANGER AND YOU DID NOT WELCOME WITH ME,
HOMELESS AND YOU DID NOT SHELTER ME,
SICK AND IN PRISON, BUT I WAS OF NO CONCERN TO YOU”

AND AT THAT TIME, THEY WILL ANSWER SAYING,
“LORD, WHEN DID WE SEE YOU HUNGRY OR THIRSTY
OR A STRANGER OR HOMELESS
OR SICK OR IN PRISON AND NOT CARE FOR YOU?”

THEN, THE MIGHTY ONE WILL ANSWER THEM, SAYING,
“I TELL YOU THE TRUTH, IN AS MUCH AS YOU DID NOT HELP
ONE OF THE LEAST OF THESE – THE MINORITY IN YOUR MIDST,
YOU DID NOT HELP ME.”

AND THE HARDHEARTED
WILL BE SENT OFF INTO ETERNAL DISAPPOINTMENT,
WHILE THOSE WHO LOVED OTHERS WILL ENTER ETERNAL LIFE.”