**November 26, 2023 Matthew 25:31-46**

***Powerful Motivator***

**Scripture:** *Matthew 25:31-46 NRSV*

*(31)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. (32)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, (33)and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. (34)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; (35)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, (36)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.' (37)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? (38)And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? (39)And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' (40)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.' (41)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; (42)for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, (43)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.' (44)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?' (45)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.' (46)And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."*

**Notes:**

1. This parable makes a person feel ***guilty***.
   1. There is so ***much*** to do.
   2. In our mind there is a ***battle*** going on.
   3. Who is ***blessed*** the most, the people we encounter, or us.
2. ***Guilt*** can be a powerful motivator.
   1. Evangelists would come preach and lay the ***guilt*** on thick.
   2. ***Revival*** is a time to reset our walk with Christ.
   3. ***Conviction*** is what we call guilt.
3. We prefer stories of ***grace*** and the ***kingdom***.
   1. ***Feeding*** the hungry, ***clothing*** the naked, ***visiting*** the sick and imprisoned, are not familiar territory.
4. How do we ***compare*** our actions to what Jesus is saying here?
   1. Will the final day of judgment be like a ***scavenger*** ***hunt***?
   2. Will Jesus check off our list of ***requirements?***
   3. What is our ***motivation*** for doing these things?
5. Jesus is saying when we see someone who needs what we have the ***ability*** to ***provide***, we must see that person as the ***embodiment*** of Christ.
   1. It is hard to see Christ in the ***actions*** of some people.
   2. When you do see Christ in them, you want to ***help***.
   3. God loves ***them*** just as much as God loves ***you***,
6. God needs you to ***show*** His love to others.
   1. Help them in the ***spirit*** of Christ,
   2. Reach out to the ***lowly*** and ***lonely***.
   3. Why? The reason is ***Jesus***.

**Script:**

Have you ever been to a disaster area? I remember back in 1977, traveling to the city of Johnstown after the flood. I am sure it was not as devastated as the flood in 1889 but things were still a mess. But it wasn’t only in Johnstown, Pleasantville was affected also. Trees uprooted, buildings moved off of their foundations, the pavement on the roads busted up and in some places the road was completely gone.

I remember in Pleasantville the bridge beside Dull’s auto wreckers was completely gone, and a car that was parked next to it floated down the creek to where the Pleasantville post office is now. During the clean up, I was asked to shovel the muck left in the foundation of a house along the stream in the weeks that followed. Mud several inches thick left behind by the flooding waters. Who could imagine such damage?

Perhaps you remember that time, but then again some of you were not around at that time. Perhaps you may remember a more recent event, perhaps the tornado that ripped through Moore Oklahoma, or hurricane Katrina that devastated much of Louisiana and especially New Orleans. What I remember the most was the trash that was left behind, either where the winds had left it, or where the people removing it from their homes left it at the side of their streets.

At an initial glance, it looks as if the task of cleaning and repair would be a never ending task. The destruction was so unbelievable. There was so much that was to be done and one would feel overwhelmed by it all. I feel the same way when I read the parable found in our sermon passage today from Matthew 25:31-46. Stand and join me in the reading of our passage today.

*Matthew 25:31-46 NRSV (31)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. (32)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, (33)and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. (34)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; (35)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, (36)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.' (37)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? (38)And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? (39)And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' (40)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.' (41)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; (42)for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, (43)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.' (44)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?' (45)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.' (46)And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."*

I feel the same way every time I encounter this parable by Jesus, You know, the one about the end of time when the Son of Man will separate the sheep from the goats, the good guys from the bad. This parable makes a person feel ***guilty.*** That parable…the one that always makes me feel guilty. There is so much to do, and I feel as if I do so little. And for that reason, I feel guilty. And believe me, guilt can be a motivator.

I consider the different things I am asked to do, ways in which I could minister to our community, and to be very honest there are times I do not want to participate. Places where I am asked to go and just help. But in my heart I either would rather sit at home and relax or I am nervous about the people I will encounter.

Our kindness outreaches are included in these things. I endure periods of anxiety every time we hold a gas buydown, a laundry Wash and Dry, The we pay it you spray it car wash, the dollar drops, or when we setup the prayer tents; In my mind, in our minds there is a battle going on, perhaps I am being lazy, perhaps I am afraid, or perhaps I am just letting my mind get away with me. But I go, because that is where I need to be, and when all is said and done, I am not sure who is blessed the most, the people we encounter, or us.

Many years ago, Fred Craddock attended a conference on hunger. Influential, knowledgeable speakers had been brought in from all over to talk on the subject. Near the end of the conference, Fred says, a young, willowy woman got up to speak. Her long straight hair fell down her back, almost to her waist. She carried a legal pad to the podium and began reading.

At first, Craddock says, he couldn’t follow what she was saying. Eventually, it dawned on him, as it did all the other listeners. She was reading the same sentence over and over, each time in a different language. Finally, at the very end, she spoke the sentence in English. All the time she was saying, “Mommy, I’m hungry. Mommy, I’m hungry.” She was the most powerful speaker of the entire conference, Craddock says. At least, she had the most impact upon him. As he and his group drove back to Atlanta, alongside the highway he read a billboard he had seen numerous times. Before, he had hardly even noticed it. This time he did. It said, “All You Can Eat Buffet, $4.99.” This time, Craddock says, that message seemed to him to be obscene. Guilt can be a powerful motivator.

Perhaps Jesus knows that too. It is a good thing that Jesus didn’t use guilt often. I remember growing up, evangelists would come and hold week long revivals. One of their biggest tools, aside from Scripture and the word of God, was guilt. They would preach a sermon and when it came time for the altar call, he would tell a story, and then he would tell you to put yourself in the shoes of the person the story was about. Then they would lay the guilt so thick that you could hardly respond from the weight of it all. Some in the congregation would be standing and singing Just as I am, clinging to the pew in front of them until their knuckles were white. And it wasn’t only the unsaved standing there; the pillars of the church would feel this same guilt, that is why it was called revival, a time to reset our walk with Christ back to new. It seemed like we would sing Just As I AM over and over again, 50 maybe a hundred times. I may be exaggerating, but while you are standing there leaving your fingerprints into the hard wood of the pew, it seems like an eternity. Conviction is what we call guilt.

**Aren’t** you glad Jesus doesn’t work that way. But there are times when the evangelists have nothing over Jesus and this parable is a perfect example. Talk about guilt! This parable seems entirely different from most stories Jesus told. In fact, we’re familiar with it, perhaps if for no other reason than it is so different from all the others. It stands out from the rest.

We prefer the stories he told of grace and the kingdom. We like the prodigal son, the good Samaritan… parables like that. But when push comes to shove, we know that when it comes to feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty and clothes to the naked, welcoming strangers, visiting the sick and imprisoned, we’re not in familiar territory. That’s not on our daily to-do lists. So how do we compare our actions to what Jesus is saying here?

You remember scavenger hunts? We used to do it all the time when we were younger. At the beginning of the hunt, you’re given a list of things you have to accumulate. The first group back with all the items wins. When you return, the leader checks off each item to make sure you’ve gotten everything that was needed.

Is that the way it’s going to be on the final day of judgment, like the end of a scavenger hunt? Jesus sitting on the throne of glory and gathering all the nations of people before him. Then, he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates sheep from goats. Will Jesus be checking off the list of requirements as we stand before him for judgment. “Let’s see… Yes, you once gave food to a hungry person. Check that one off. Oh, I attended church every Sunday last year. Check that one off. There was the time you gave a drink of water to the thirsty child. Check. Visited a jail? Check.”

Is that the way it’s going to be? And if so, what is going to be our motivation for doing these things? Will we get credit in heaven for clothing the naked by giving our old stuff to Goodwill for the tax deduction, or just to get it out of the house?

And what if we help someone solely out of guilt or just to get them to go away? Have you ever given a beggar some money just so he will leave? Is once enough, or do we have to do it over and over and over again? Because, just as you finish giving food to a hungry person another hungry person comes to your door. Word gets around, you know. There’s a network out there. They share with each other You begin to realize that the more you help the more there are who come to your door. The task becomes overwhelming, like after a hurricane. After all, even Jesus said the poor you will have with you always. Didn’t he say that? I think he did. Can you feed one hungry person and make it into heaven? Or toss a quarter in a cup or throw a dollar bill at an old woman in the grocery store and call it done? “There! There’s my good deed for the day, my ticket to eternity with the sheep!”

No, I think what Jesus is saying is that when you see a hungry or thirsty person, someone in prison or without adequate clothing, someone who is sick and has no one to take care of them in other words, someone not like you when you see someone who needs what you have the ability to provide, you must see that person as the embodiment of Christ… even if that person doesn’t look or act like you; even if that person is a far cry from what you imagined Jesus to look like. Maybe even especially since that person doesn’t look or act like either Jesus or you.

It is not easy to do. Denny mentioned a few weeks ago talking with a woman and telling her how much we as a church give to the needy each year, through mission’s and local benevolences. I get many calls each month from people looking for help with groceries, gas, rent, heating assistance; and a gambit of other requests and at one point I had to cut back and make guidelines on who we helped, Why you may ask…because of people who would seek out generosity and take advantage of it.

Some of these people are habitual users of the SYSTEM, They feel entitled to our services, when they do not get what they want they get angry, they give an attitude, and they will tell lies about you and the situations in which you encountered them. It is hard to see Christ in the actions and likenesses of some of these people. It’s hard to see Christ in a person like that. After all, they’re probably sitting there with a list of churches and phone numbers. Instead of working, they work the system. That’s what they do. They either don’t want to get better, or they do not know how; they just want to get what they can as easily as they can get it.

It’s hard to see Jesus in people like that. But then, try to put yourself in their place, when you do it becomes easier to see Christ in them. And when you do see Christ in them, you do want to help. I am not talking about encouraging their behavior or enabling them to continue the pattern. But you can help, in fact, you can’t do anything but help. You do so, not because you feel guilty, but because you know God loves them just as much as God loves you, and God needs you to show His love to them.

And when you help them in the spirit of Christ, you’re not even aware that you’re doing it. That’s the surprising thing about Jesus’ story. Those who helped others in Jesus’ name, and even those who didn’t, weren’t even aware of what was going on. Evidently, helping others is simply a natural result of being faithful.

Earlier this past week, I spent the better part of three days preparing for our free thanksgiving meal. I think there are a lot of reasons not to do it. A lot of reasons why I could have done something different. First, all the work involved with the meal is tiresome. Not only that but there are plenty of other people who could help but don’t. But then I think about why we started having this free meal; so that those who do not have the funds or ability to make a traditional thanksgiving meal are able to celebrate thanksgiving. Also for those who may be eating alone that day, perhaps their loved ones have all passed away, they could come and share in a meal with another person and they wouldn’t need to eat alone.

We started this tradition to reach out to the lowly and lonely. I think back to our first few years of doing this and I remember Mrs. Borischak and her sister and brothers. They would meet here because it was half way between their homes. And they would share in a family thanksgiving together in our presence. They would enjoy the free meal, but they would also share in the conversation and reminiscing of years past. There are a lot of reasons not to do such a thing, and only one reason I can think of is to do it. But it’s reason enough. It is reason enough. The reason is Jesus – my Jesus, your Jesus –He looks a whole lot like those who drive into our parking lot to receive their thanksgiving meal, people who look nothing like you or me, and that, that may be the point.