



“What Matters Most”

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***The Last Sunday in Pentecost
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Matthew 25: 31-46 (NRSV)***

This past July while Stephanie and I were in Mexico we received word that my uncles' farms in central Iowa had been hit by tornado-force straight winds called “derechos.”

Those of you who were in town this summer may remember me describing this storm, and asking for prayers for my family. The storm started near Des Moines, Iowa and traveled 550 miles across the Upper Midwest to Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Most of the buildings and silos on my uncles' farms were destroyed by the storm. They lost some livestock, and the animals that survived were stressed by the experience and lost weight. The crops were badly damaged and debris was scattered across millions of acres of farmland. This mess created havoc at harvest time.

Like many farmers, my relatives carried farm insurance that covered a portion of their losses, but no farmers could afford enough insurance to protect themselves from these catastrophic losses.

I debated for weeks about what to do to help my family back home. I imagined dropping everything here and flying back for a couple of weeks to help.

I was touched by an offer from some of our leaders to organize a work crew or hold a fund-raiser to help my family with the cleanup or rebuilding work.

I called home and talked with my aunts and uncles, and shared these ideas with them. They said that they appreciated our offers, but thought that they would be fine. They explained that their neighbors and our relatives who hadn't been hit by the storm had come to their aid.

The most memorable part of my conversation with my aunts and uncles was when my mom's oldest brother and sister in-law told me that their farm losses were put into perspective by the news that their youngest daughter (my cousin Susan) was having health problems.

What had been misdiagnosed as asthma or stress-related symptoms turned out to be a large tumor growing between her left lung and her heart. She had seen specialists in Des Moines and Iowa City. They said that the tumor wasn't cancerous, but that it had to be surgically removed. Susan's health issues, they explained, made their farm losses seem small in comparison.

Later in the summer, Susan had the prescribed surgery. She was in and out of the hospital in less than a week. Within a month, she was back to work, and by Labor Day, she and her fiancé announced their engagement and plans to be married in March 2012, at the church where Susan grew up, and where my mother's family has been members for the past 100 years.

II

That phone conversation with my aunt and uncle reminded me that at least once in most people's lifetimes something happens that gives them/us such pause that we deeply reevaluate what matters most to us.

The Baptists that I went to seminary with at Andover Newton called these occasions "come-to-Jesus moments."

Sometimes people experience these come-to-Jesus moments through happy occasions like falling in love, or welcoming a baby into the family; but more often than not, most people (in my experience) come to Jesus as the result of a major health crisis, or the death of a loved one.

It should be no surprise, then, that Matthew chooses Judgment Day as the setting for Jesus' teaching about what matters most.

Today's gospel reading is an ethics lesson presented as an apocalyptic vision. New Testament scholar Fred Craddock explains in his exegesis of Matthew 25 that: "The purpose of the vision is...for ethical instruction."¹ The lesson to be learned is what matters most.

In Matthew's view, what matters most is compassion for our neighbors in need: the hungry and thirsty, strangers, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned.

It's helpful in interpreting today's passage to know that Matthew's gospel grew out of a reform movement within Judaism that evolved into a Jewish Christian community in Palestine. This group opposed strict adherence to Levitical codes and rituals, and promoted the work of compassion and justice.

III

In theory, we agree with Matthew. We are big on love and justice and small on rules and rituals. But in reality, the work of love and justice is time-consuming and emotionally,

¹ Fred B. Craddock, et al. *Preaching Through the Christian Year: Year A*. (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992), p. 519.

spiritually, and physically demanding. Onlookers tend to think of us as idealists or crackpots, because true change and sustained results do not come quickly. It's easier to become absorbed in our own lives and the needs of those in our inner circle. It's harder to see, to listen, and to share the struggle with those who are suffering—especially those whose suffering seems intractable.

Pastors are not immune to these circumstances. Just yesterday after we finished decorating the church, all I wanted to do was get my dry cleaning and go home and finish this sermon on the Great Judgment; but right there in front of my dry cleaners was a homeless family of five (two adults, a baby, and two grade school girls). The children's father asked me if I could help them.

"Yes," I said, "but first I need to get my dry cleaning. The store is closing in a few minutes."

I went into the cleaners, traded laundry with the proprietress, and asked her how long the homeless family had been out front.

"About two weeks," she said. "The customers don't like them. They complain. They want me to call the police. Do you want me to call the police?" she asked.

"No," I said. "I'll try to help them. I was just wondering what you knew about them."

I walked back outside the store, introduced myself to the family, and began to assess their situation, presuming that at best I could help ameliorate their problems for maybe 24 hours.

Their story was familiar. The family had been homeless since the parents had been laid off from work a while back. The children were enrolled in school in San Leandro. The family was on a waiting list for two shelters in the county, one in Hayward (FESCO) and the other in Richmond. They were told to call every day to see if their name had come up in the list. They called every day. The message was the same. The shelters were full. They were told to call back next day. The cycle continues.

I asked the parents if they had applied for welfare. They said they had. From their description, I discerned that they had maxed out their lifetime welfare benefits, and were only eligible for General Assistance and WIC for the mother and baby. As some of us know from personal or professional experience, GA and WIC aren't enough for even one person to live on, let alone a family; so now this family spends most of their day begging in front of the Foothill Safeway and Starbucks trying to gather enough spare change to pay for each night's lodging at a cheap motel along I-580 in Castro Valley.

I offered to go back to the church and get the family some food and information from Hayward CAN and Eden I & R about local services. A Starbucks employee brought the family free hot chocolate, and invited them to go inside and get warm. Complete

strangers brought the family sandwiches, a few groceries, and change for their motel collection.

It was dark and raining when I returned from the church with a half-bag of groceries that didn't have to be cooked before eating, and information about local social service organizations. I negotiated with the parents to take the mother and three girls to a local motel, and said that our church would pay for one night's lodging.

I didn't have enough room in my car for the whole family, and I wasn't born yesterday. So I gave the father a flashlight, and I explained that he would have to walk to the motel. I thought, if he really is the father of these children, he will be grateful and he will thank me for helping his family. If he is not their father, he will suggest a different plan.

He was grateful and thanked me. He loaded the children in the car, and folded the baby stroller up and put it in my trunk along with the rest of his family's worldly possessions.

I drove the mother and the three children to a motel that I knew was inexpensive and safe. The mother and I registered the family in a room. We carried their baby and belongings to their sleeping room, and parted company.

IV

Twenty-five years in the ministry has taught me how to size up indigents' needs pretty quickly, and I've had to learn over the past nine years what options are (and aren't) available here in South County to help an individual or a family in crisis.

Our congregation's gifts to the Deacons' Fund, which we receive on the first Sunday of most months, make it possible for our church to provide a small amount of emergency assistance for families like the one I encountered at the dry cleaners yesterday, and families in our own congregation. The need isn't just outside; it's in here, too.

Despite having all these seasoning experiences, nothing in life has taught me to accept the fact that homeless people—particularly homeless children—are invisible to a rather large portion of our society. If it were not so, every homeless child in America would have a roof over their heads tonight, but they won't.

So Jesus, in Matthew's gospel, makes the case that the first order of business for his followers is to see those whom others treat as invisible, and he doesn't mince words.

Jesus puts it this way: when your last day on earth comes, you won't be judged by whether you adhered to the purity codes and practiced the right rituals. You'll be judged by whether you saw the needs of others—moreover you'll be judged by whether you (and I) saw the face of Christ in those whose basic needs were unfulfilled, and whether you (and I) fed, clothed, welcomed, or visited these people.

The gospel lesson isn't very complicated. I noticed yesterday that small children were tugging on their parents' coats and hands, and asking to help this homeless family. They had eyes to see. They knew the difference between right and wrong. Do we?

I am pretty sure we do. I think that's why we are here—not just to put small change in someone's collection plate, but to understand the root causes of poverty and oppression, and to try, in Christ's name, to help people stay strong in the struggle and recover from these tornado-like winds that blow (sometimes impartially) through their lives. Amen.