

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling  
First Presbyterian Church  
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Matthew 25:31-46

### **“Actions Count”**

In early 2013, Canadian sculptor Timothy Schmalz unveiled “Homeless Jesus”, a bronze sculpture depicting Jesus as a homeless person, sleeping on a park bench.

Schmalz installed the original sculpture at Regis College, University of Toronto, and since then, casts have been installed worldwide. The sculpture is designed in such a way that Jesus is huddled beneath a blanket, his face and hands obscured. Only the crucifixion wounds on his feet reveal his identity.

A devout Catholic, Schmalz describes the sculpture as a “visual translation” of our Gospel reading for this week, in which Jesus identifies himself with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the prisoner, and then tells his followers: “Whatever you did to one of the least of these, you did it to me.”

Not surprisingly, reactions to the statue vary. Some people find it offensive. Others adore it. Pope Francis has blessed it. People sit and pray beside it.

In one city, a person who lives a couple of doors down from a church where the sculpture was installed, wrote a letter to the editor saying it creeps him out. Some neighbors feel that it's an insulting depiction of the son of God, and that what appears to be a hobo curled up on a bench demeans the neighborhood.

In many cities, the police have been called because bystanders assume the figure beneath the blanket is a real homeless person. That's right. People have called the cops on Jesus.

“What you did to the least of these, you did to me.”

Today's reading from Matthew is the 3<sup>rd</sup> of 3 stories Jesus tells his disciples in the last week of his life, and he tells these stories with greater and greater urgency. What do they all have in common? They're all about judgement day.

Now, we could make these stories out to be more complicated than they are, but the meaning is quite clear in all of them: waste your responsibility to care for others, especially "the least of these", and you'll face consequences. You will be judged, we will be judged, by Jesus for what we do and do not do. We will be held accountable to God for how we've lived our lives. Period.

On this last Sunday of the church year Jesus lets us know in no uncertain terms that we will be judged by what we do or, as the case may be, by what we don't do. It's that simple. We're called to serve, not ignore or overlook or make assumptions about someone's need, but to look into each person's face and see Christ and help them.

"What you do for and to the least of these-the sick, hungry, homeless, oppressed, and imprisoned, you do to me," Jesus said.

*What you do to them, you do to me.*

That's a radical statement, because here Jesus tells us that God isn't a remote deity living on a throne up there in the clouds or living out there somewhere in the mysterious reaches of the universe. God is here, Jesus said, in the messiness of life. God is here, particularly in the face of the person who needs you. God is in the face of the homeless man who regularly walks down Wayne Street; he's in the face of the young couple standing on the corner with their cardboard sign asking for food or money; he's in the face of the alcoholic or recovering addict who shows up here, trying to maintain her sobriety for another day.

You want to see Jesus? Go down to the Rescue Mission.

Jim Wallis, a Christian evangelical who works tirelessly for the poor, writes about one of his mentors in his book "God's Politics". Mary Glover is her name, and she's an old Pentecostal woman who has taught him more about serving "the least of these" than any of Wallis' seminary professors ever did. She was a regular volunteer in the weekly food line at the food pantry, and also so poor that she herself needed the bag of groceries that were passed out each week. Mary often said the prayer before they opened the doors on Saturday mornings.

She'd usually start by saying something like, "Thank you, Lord, for waking us up this morning! Thank you, Lord, that our walls were not our grave and our bed was not our cooling board! Thank you, Lord!" Then she would always pray the same words, "**Lord, we know that you'll be comin' through this line today, so Lord, help us to treat you well!**" (*God's Politics*, page 215).

Her prayer comes right out of this passage from Matthew 25. "What you do for and to the least of these, you do to me," Jesus said.

Wallis writes, "I've read most every commentary on the text, and no biblical scholar gets it better than Mary Glover."

Wallis also writes that what's most striking to him about the passage is that the people gathered in front of Christ's throne really believe they are his followers. So imagine how stunned they must be when they learn that they'll be separated and judged by how they've treated the poor! The poor! We won't be judged by our personal piety, or our right doctrine or our good theology or church leadership or success in ministry. We'll be judged by how well we've treated the poor, the least of these.

And not just the poor we deem worthy of our assistance, not just the justifiably poor (whatever that means), but all the poor.

Last Sunday's Journal-Gazette had an Op-Ed written by the program director of the Allen County Salvation Army. It's the time of year when their red kettles appear and they're assisting children with coats, toys, clothes

and food. She's been working with the SA on their Christmas drive for 13 years, and in that time she's witnessed a disturbing trend: a growing number of people who put criteria on whom they will assist. At a time when COVID-19 has pushed the SA to its limits, she writes that "they also have the highest number of demands from donors insisting that before the help a family or child, they know their political affiliation. They rant about how these anonymous people are lazy and unjustly entitled," she writes. Because apparently, if you vote a different party, you're not worthy of basic necessities.

She also notes that this year marks the highest demand for "non-ethnic" names of children on their Angel Tree. Some people only want "traditional names" or names they can pronounce; that's not even a thinly veiled racism. It's just racism.

She writes that through the years she's known the pain of clients who escape in the middle of the night to flee a violent situation; she's known the "Angst of soldiers who served our country bravely, and now are finding it impossible to support their families because of their trauma," and she's known other parents who have left their job to care for a child with cancer. But for the first time, she writes, "My heart has opened up to an entirely different kind of hurt. One that sees these people and in response clenches their fists. One who mocks and shames, judges and scorns, then empowered, turns to rally others behind them to spread the sickness of hate."

"I am so fearful of what is to become not only of the thousands of vulnerable we care for but for ourselves and our humanity as it begins to peel away from us."

Friends, it's not up to us to play judge and jury as to who is worthy of our assistance and who is not. What WE ARE CALLED TO DO is to remember what Jesus said: "When you did it to one of the least of these, my family, you did it to me." Not, please notice, just the certifiably hungry, or those that fall below the legal poverty limit, or the truly deserving. Not those who align with our political views, or who look like us, but everyone.

A sheep doesn't step over a homeless person and tell him to get a job. A sheep doesn't insist that the person in jail should live in cruel and inhumane conditions because of her crime. A sheep doesn't look at these people and see a drag on society or someone who hasn't pulled himself up by his bootstraps. In 2020, a sheep doesn't say, "I have rights and freedoms so you can't make me wear a mask." The sheep puts on the mask. The sheep sees Christ, a child of God, in need of care and compassion.

But in addition, sheep don't reach out in compassion because they want to earn their reward in heaven. They don't do these things to earn God's love or respect or anyone else's love or respect or to make sure they are considered righteous at the end of time. The sheep reach out in compassion because that is the natural thing to do to show our love for God. To see Christ in the least of these is a natural extension of the grace God has granted us. We give ourselves to others because God gave God's self to us. It is that simple.

The contemporary theologian Letty Russell echoed these words when she said, "We welcome the stranger, the outcast, the downtrodden, the least of these in our world . . . not because it's a nice social thing to do, but because first we have been loved by God."

Being a person of faith means practicing our faith, and we practice our faith by serving all of God's children, especially the least of these. And the reason we do that is because we have been blessed with the grace of God, and so in return we are gracious to others.

On Thanksgiving Day, even this year in the midst of COVID-19 and empty chairs, many of us will still sit down at tables flowing with the bounty God has provided; but some will not. As you sit down at your table, remember the least of these, because Christ dwells in them. But do more than remember. Take action.

Do something to help others. Do something big, or do something small, but do something. It is the best response we can make to God for the many blessings we have received from God's hands. Do something to serve others and remember that Jesus didn't ask any of the people he helped for

a list of their qualifications, he just helped them because that was the business he was in, and it is the business to which he calls us.

As children, we are told to count our blessings. I know it's hard this year with everything we've faced. But there's something deeply profound about giving thanks in the midst of adversity. So if you're thankful for your health, vow to help someone who is not healthy. If you're thankful for your family, promise to spend time with someone who is lonely. If you're thankful for the food that graces your table, promise to help someone who is hungry; if you are thankful for your warm home, vow to help someone who is cold and without shelter.

What a wonderful gift that would in this year of hardship if more of us did those things rather than clench our fists in hate. The turnaround begins with us.

*“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, 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.”*

Amen.

Sources:

“You Did It To Me”, Journey with Jesus, Debie Thomas, November 15, 2020

“Holiday Jeer”, Jama Smith, Journal Gazette, November 15, 2020,