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*Matthew 25:34-40*

*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; 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.” 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? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” 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.”*

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If you’re like me, you have times when so much of what Jesus says seems open to varying and sometimes competing interpretations. The parable heard by 12 different people will yield 12 very different interpretations. Sometimes, Jesus’ actions seem weird or unpredictable. Why exactly did Jesus curse that fig tree when it wasn’t even fig season? Other times, we might complain that Jesus contradicts himself. Why would Jesus tell a story chastising a group of women who come unprepared to a wedding banquet without oil in their lamps, and then elsewhere tell us not to store up for us treasures on earth where moth and rust consume? What is it, Jesus? Are we supposed to keep oil reserves or not?!

And if, like me, you have those frustrations from time to time when you read your Bible, have I got passage for you! In fact, I have a whole chapter for you, but for today we’ll stick with a few verses. Matthew 25:34-40 lays out pretty much the most simple, straightforward, and specific guideline for what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

Feed the hungry. Give water to the thirsty. Welcome the stranger. Clothe the naked. Care for the sick. Advocate for the prisoner.

Full stop. There you have it. Mic drop.

Friends, there is so much that we can differ and still be faithful Christians together. You can vote your way and I’ll vote mine, and we can still be faithful followers of Jesus. You can cheer for your Tarheels, or Wolfpack, or Demon Deacons (just please not the Blue Devils!), and I can root for my Jayhawks, and we can still be faithful followers of Jesus. On a more serious note, we can have differences of opinions in *how* best to go about the work of feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, eradicating poverty, providing affordable healthcare, and treating the incarcerated with compassion, and we can still be faithful followers of Jesus.

But Jesus lays out for us a simple truth: his followers *must* agree that the hungry *should* be fed, and the thirsty given drink, the stranger welcomed, the naked clothed, the sick cared for, and the prisoner treated with dignity. These, Jesus tells us, are some of the few truly *non-negotiables* for the community of believers who seek to follow him. It’s telling too that this list is unconditional. Jesus doesn’t say the hungry should be fed *if* they do this or that. He doesn’t say that the stranger should be welcomed *if* they look, or act, or speak a certain way. He doesn’t say that sick should be cared for *only if* they can afford it.

And this truth can be downright offensive in the transactional culture in which we live.

And, for that, I’m grateful that this scripture was the foundation for the curriculum Owen journeyed through during his confirmation process. Because, make no mistake about it, there are many in Owen’s generation (Gen Z) and my own (Millennial) who have become so very disillusioned with the Church because it’s too often lost sight of the centrality of Jesus’ mandate in Matthew 25. Yes, worship is important. Yes, our music ministry is important. Yes, our fellowship opportunities to grow together as a church are important. But when we allow our focus on those things to be done to the detriment of feeding, giving drink, caring, advocating, clothing, uplifting, liberating, then we cease to be the Church of Jesus Christ. When we ignore Christ’s call in Matthew 25, we cease worshiping God and worship ourselves.

In The Word This Week last Tuesday, we watched a video from the Presbyterian Mission Agency introducing our denomination’s “Matthew 25 Initiative” to encourage and support congregations in a three-fold focus: 1) building congregational vitality, 2) dismantling structural racism, and 3) eradicating systemic poverty. In the video, Greensboro native Rev. Dr. Diane Moffett suggested that every congregation should ask the following question of itself: if your church were to close it’s doors today, would anyone outside of your active membership care? If the honest answer to that question is “no,” the chances are the congregation has fulfilled its natural life-cycle and should close so that something new can be resurrected in its place. If the answer to that question is “yes,” then we have more work to be done!

I sincerely believe that there would be many, many folks outside our active membership who would care if we closed our doors today. The people at Greensboro Urban Ministries, the partnerships we do with A Simple Gesture and other non-profits, our Guilford Guys community, the people we support with our Deacon’s Fund to help pay for medical bills, emergency rental assistance and utility bills, the advocacy of our Justice and Peacemaking and Mission committees, the list goes on.

So, yes, there is so much that our church is doing already to answer the call to be a Matthew 25 church. *And* there’s room for us to continue to grow into that call to discipleship. Because if there’s anything I’ve learned in my life in the church, both as a parishioner and as a pastor, is that the congregation’s that prioritize the Matthew 25 mandate tend to be the one’s with the clearest identity and purpose.

And Owen, in just a few minutes, will be ordained as a Ruling Elder in the Presbyterian Church and installed to active service on our Session. This means that Owen is now an important part of the group of people this congregation has elected to measure this congregation’s fidelity to our Matthew 25 call to discipleship. And that means our job is to follow a very simple formula in today’s passage.

“I was \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ and you \_\_\_\_\_\_\_.”

Jesus is still calling to us today. His voice is heard in those who need Matthew 25 the most:

"I was starving in Gaza and you \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.”

“I was incarcerated on a minor drug offense and can’t afford bail so I lost my job and you \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.”

“I was informed that my rent will be raised $450 next month and you \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.”

“I was disowned by my parents because I’m gay and you \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.”

“I was denied coverage for a life-saving procedure and you \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.”

Neighbors, the needs that Matthew 25 addresses are as present today as they were when Jesus first called us to action. Now, it should be noted that no single congregation by itself can or should be expected to address every single one of these needs. But this is the heartbeat of the Gospel and the very cornerstone of our faith. And I’m grateful to serve a congregation that takes that seriously. And I hope y’all will join me in prayer for our colleague-in-ministry, Owen, who today joins the ranks of those God has called to lead this church to remain faithful to that commitment!

In the name of God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, may all of us, God’s children, say: **Amen.**