

Sermon Text Matthew 25:31-46

I do want to say, by way of responding and thanksgiving to what God has given us, I want to thank those who have given the past two days for renovating the Salvation Army's homeless shelter, and I want to thank also Sarah Hartung, who has taken upon herself the title of “Coat Czar.” She's in charge of taking up coats for children who need coats, and adults who need coats as well. We will be doing those things in the weeks to come as a way of living out our faith. Living out your faith is very important. That is what this Scripture is all about.

There's a tongue in cheek saying that I sort of like. You know I rarely ever get political at all, and I'm sure this saying is political, but I still like it. There is a saying, which is that a conservative is a liberal who has been mugged. Think about it.

Life can make you cynical. At Main Street here, we have been broken into, and had to put in an alarm system, which mostly has caught the staff. The police have gotten to know all of our staff members, I believe. We've had pocketbooks stolen, before I came here, out of the choir room during worship, and our secretary, Emmie, had her billfold taken last week by someone who came, ostensibly, for help. I know that we all have some reason to build walls and to give strangers a wide berth. I used to pick up hitchhikers! Odd, back when I had almost no money, I always gave to those who asked. Once when I was a poor student, up in Durham at the A&P grocery, there was a man behind me in line, and it was the day before Thanksgiving, and he was counting his pennies again and again. He was just getting a couple of things, and I quietly paid a little extra money to the cashier to help cover his items, and then I just walked on out. I remember how right and how holy that moment felt, BUT now with the benefit of age and superior rationalization skills and years of being lied to and taken advantage of and a much larger income, I am more careful, and in many ways, less giving. I still feel in my heart compassion to help, but often, my super rational self takes over and talks my heart right out of it! I quietly walk on by, and forget. I think that's how people in need become invisible.

Invisible can become a verb, and we do “invisible” people that we don't want to see. I have been invisibled before. I worked construction in Mauldin one summer, pick up labor, and one day they just didn't pick us up, and so my friend, Mark, and I went walking around Mauldin, wearing our nasty construction clothes, probably the second or third day we had worn those clothes, and we wandered into a drugstore that was open for breakfast, and I will never forget the feeling. You know, I'm a doctor's son, but that day, as I walked in, their welcome smiles dropped off their faces. They broke eye contact, and the sidelong glances said, “We don't trust you. We don't want you here. We're not going to ask you what you want. We're going to invisibilize you until you leave.” I remember wanting to go home, and clean up, and come back just to prove to them I was okay. Really, I'm one of you. I'm respectable. Then I thought of all those who wander in places all over wearing their dirty work clothes, or perhaps their only clothes, and I felt just a little that day what it must be like to be invisibled all the time, sidelong glanced out of places all the time, not waited on and ignored all the time. That is what I hear of the goats in this story – the goats judging themselves.

Lord, when did I see you poor or sick or in prison or thirsty or ill or ill-clothed? Lord, I did not see you like that. I never even looked for you like that! If I had known it was you, I would have done something. If I had known it was you, I would have responded differently.

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It's easy to ignore and then forget people if you try. We invisible people's problems right in front of us because we don't want to get involved. It costs to get involved. It always costs to love, and that is why the symbol of our faith is the Cross, how much it cost God to get involved and to love us. We talk to people who sometimes are practically screaming, “Help me! Hold me! Just spend a minute with me! Pray with me! I'm scared! I'm alone!” We pretend not to notice. We pretend to have somewhere more important to be or some thing more important to do, and then we say to ourselves as we escape, “That seemed okay. That seemed polite.” What will it look like later on, much later on? Judgment time later on? When Jesus asks, “I was troubled, and you pretended not to notice. I was afraid, and you pretended not to notice. I was hurting myself with destructive behavior, and you didn't want to get involved. I needed the basics of life, and you held tight to your wallet.” Judgment is wrought in this parable of judgment, not so much by what you do as by the motives behind what you do and what you don't. God, Scripture says, sees our hearts. Ultimately, it is our hearts. As Jesus says in Luke, the 6th chapter, “The good man out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil man out of the evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart, his mouth speaks.” The very next verse, I believe, is a bit of sarcasm with truth. Jesus says, “Why do you even call me ‘Lord, Lord’, and not do what I tell you.”

Loving acts, real ones, come out of the heart. Judgment reveals your heart. Judgment reveals whether God's love flows through you or not, whether your eyes are open to the image of God and others or not. This might be instructive in understanding what Jesus meant when he said your righteousness must exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees. You see, the Pharisees acted respectably, and they behaved fine and upstanding in public, BUT they did it for praise. They did it for reputation. When no one was looking at them, I believe they quit looking at others. They pretended not to see the man lying naked and bleeding in the ditch.

John 7:38, “He who believes in Me,” as the Scripture says, “Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.” Children of God have got power deep within. It comes up and out to others. It shows itself even when no one is looking. I have already confessed to you that at times I have let the cynicism and the betrayal of others beat down my instinct to help.

In the Good Samaritan story, Jesus asked, “Which one proved to be brother to the man in the ditch?” The answer is the one who helped! He said go and do likewise, go and do likewise. When that man stopped and helped the man in the ditch, he was helping Jesus even though nobody was there to see. God identifies with those who suffer and are in genuine need. God sends some of us out to help them in His name. When you do good out of compassion, out of your heart for others in need, you are doing it for God, and you are continuing the ministry of Christ. Your motive, your motive matters!

Listen closely to the relationship between motive and thanksgiving and generosity in these following few verses from II Corinthians. “Each one must do as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver, and God is able to provide you with every blessing and abundance, provide you with blessings so that you may always have enough of everything, so that you may provide in abundance for every good work.” You are blessed so that you have money to bless others in God's name. Verse 11, “You will be enriched in every way for great generosity which through us will produce thanksgiving to God because people will see that it is God who changed our hearts and made us

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compassionate and generous people.” If we don’t want to, if we feel no compassion, if there is nothing in us which really cares and wants to cheerfully meet the needs of others, and we do it only perhaps for reward, then we are like the priest and Levites who passed by the man in the ditch in that Good Samaritan story, but the Samaritan was motivated by compassion, and the compassion welled up within his heart, and he acted. Here’s the formula. He saw. He had compassion. He acted. Jesus said, “Go and do likewise.”

Those in this judgment parable were completely unaware that they had done anything unto God, or had even done anything extraordinary. The compassion just welled up within them whether anyone was watching or not. Those who damned themselves saw and looked away, and passed by on the other side. In some mysterious way, each was actually doing or failing to do unto God and Christ. What you do matters to God. Your internal motive matters to God.

On tests, they say you should go with your first thought. I remember studying for the SAT. They said go with your first thought. On some of the math questions, I remember thinking I don’t have a first thought. Seriously, spiritually, is your first thought love and compassion out to others, or is your first thought, who’s watching? Or is your first thought, what is the least, and I do mean the very least, I can do? As the prophets had a fire in their bones to proclaim God’s word, so Christians should have a love in their heart, say a living flame of God’s love, that cannot be contained, and doesn’t need to wait on a committee to act. You meet the need you see because God’s love compels you. The compassion of God’s Holy Spirit within you compels you. Your heart goes out to them. You feel something. It’s who you are on the inside coming out. God’s love is God’s word made flesh, and God’s Holy Spirit can be a fire in your bones, which cannot be contained. I have felt God’s fire and acted, but I must confess I have also rationalized my fears, and sometimes selfishness, and walked away and pretended not to see, perhaps praying and hoping someone else would do something. It doesn’t always take a tremendous act. It doesn’t always take a tremendous sacrifice to be doing God’s will.

I remember once I was on call at the Medical University in Charleston as the chaplain for out-of-town Methodists. I met an out-of-state woman, who was in the psych ward. She was near death, and she was also a compulsive hand washer. She said she could not make herself touch her own grandchildren, and she was far from home, and it was her birthday. I remember feeling completely out of my element. I was probably 26 years old. I remember the institutional noise and the confusion swirling around me. I remember thinking, “She is not my member. I can just back out of here.” Then, suddenly, I was present, and she was present, and that professional distance was shattered, and I stood quietly before just another person in pain. I prayed. I prayed first to God, “God, tell me what to pray!” Then, I prayed, out loud, I don’t know what. Anyway, she smiled, and then, and I did not realize what a miracle it was until later, miraculously, she took my hand. In spite of me, in spite of mixed motives, I stayed just one second longer than my comfort level, and God found a way to use me, unwilling, inadequate, and rationalizing all the way. We don’t have to give God much, just something to work with. A mustard seed faith will do. A few loaves and fish will do. Something. God needs only a little willingness and faith to do great things. The parable says one day you’ll be asked, and you will not even remember the acts of love and kindness and compassion. They will have come too naturally and too instantly to keep track of. Good, Godly acts require no

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premeditation or calculation, just generosity and caring, overflowing as living water from somewhere deep within you, deep within your warmed and God-filled heart.

John Wesley said that this sort of holiness can become a habit as you give in to God, as you give yourself up to God. You cannot start by asking, “Now, exactly who is my brother?” The mental calculus of doing the bare minimum and loving only those you are required to and passing by the others is not and cannot be twisted into Jesus’ teaching. The actors of the blessing in this Scripture did not think beforehand, “What will I gain? Who is looking? Must I help this one?” No, they merely acted, out of what was in their hearts. It came so naturally they did not later even recall. Those cast out never saw the need, never saw the need at all, and that was their heart. Every encounter with others is in some way an encounter with God, or at the very least, a being created in the image of God, and so how could it not matter? If you never act loving unless you think there is pay off for you personally, then how could that selfish motive not matter to God? Living and loving with God is the pearl of great price. It is the incomparable treasure. It is eternal life begun here and now. It is the way, the truth, and the light God intended. Living and loving with God and with God’s Spirit bubbling up through you naturally out to others, that is what Jesus’ life looked like. At the end of your life, it will become obvious to you that it has been obvious to God, who you really are. I better say that again. At the end of our lives, it will become obvious to us that it has been obvious to God, who we really are. The judgment is one that comes internally. As Jesus points out, you had your chance to live a loving life. You had your chance to fill up with a heart warmed and enlivened by God’s Spirit, a life that spilled over into the need and the suffering of others. You had your chance to live compassion from the heart. Now, some people believe, now here’s a movie of your life. Here’s how you actually lived when no one was watching. Here were your chances to echo my love. Here were your opportunities to allow my compassion to flow through you. You did nothing or you did it to be seen. The judgment is you have your chance or perhaps you’ve already had your reward. God’s love cannot flow up and out of us if it is not there to begin with. That’s why Jesus said a changed heart, a warmed heart, a spiritual rebirth is required, and when we connect to God, we begin that.

The word for save in the Bible is also the word for heal. Spiritually healed hearts are able to love, able to love as Jesus loved. This is a parable of judgment. You will notice that faith is not mentioned. Both the sheep and the goats say, “Lord.” They all claimed faith, but only some lived it. Jesus said, “Elsewhere by your fruits you shall know them,” and this judgment parable says, “By our fruits does God know us?”

I would like to close with a poem by Ann Weems. “Our yearning after God, our hope for a better way, creates infinite possibilities to touch the lives of the untouched, to reach the hearts of the unreached, to heal the wounds of the unhealed, to feed the bodies of the unfed, to accept the personhood of the unacceptable, and to love the being of the unloved. Our gifts are gifts of hope. Oh God, touch, reach, heal, feed, accept and love us that we might love one another.” 1 John 3:18, “Little children let us not love with word or with tongue but in deed and in truth.” Lord, indeed, guide us as individuals and as a unity of the body of Christ here at Main Street to love not just in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth. Amen.