

“United in Christ”

**Pastor Dave Carlson
First Presbyterian Church
March 22, 2015**

New Testament Lesson: Matthew 25:31-46

Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 98:7-9

The ChristCare Mission Outreach group is planning to volunteer at the Cherith Brook House on April 11, and any of you or your friends are welcome to join them there.

Cherith Brook was founded by Presbyterian minister Eric Garbison with its stated mission being “to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, and visit the prisoner and the sick in the name of Jesus.”

That sounds real familiar, doesn't it? It's what we just heard read. In one of Jesus' last great lessons on life, he says we will be judged on whether we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, and visit those who are sick or in prison.

“Come, you that are blessed by my Father,” says Jesus, “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.” And how do the righteous answer him? ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you’ hungry or thirsty, a stranger or naked, sick or in prison and took care of 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.’”

There's a pretty simple lesson in all of this. It's not about us. And yet, doesn't it really feel like it's about us – like we are being judged? Actually, this teaching by Jesus is not about being judged. It's about caring for one another, as we endure the struggles of life. Bible scholar M. Eugene Boring notes that all the lessons in this part of Mathew are about our mutual “care and encouragement,” for one another.

So it's more about the here and now, than it is about the “Final Judgment.” And yet, it is about our little judgments, the little judgments that we make everyday about ourselves, about others, and about Jesus. The little judgments we make, and how they relate to God's grace, through which we do receive salvation and eternal life.

As Presbyterians, we believe that our salvation comes only by the grace of God through our faith in Jesus Christ. We can see that in today's New Testament Lesson. Those who help out as instruments of God's grace don't even realize they're doing it. They are just living out their faith.

As I said, it's not primarily about us. It's about Jesus and it's about people in need. Jesus equates himself with people in need. Despite his great power and glory, Jesus says, "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." And that's where we do come in, as either a "sheep" or a "goat". "All the nations will be gathered before him," says Jesus, "and he will separate people one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left."

What makes someone a "sheep" or a "goat"? That's a pretty important question because sheep are blessed to inherit the kingdom and goats, says Jesus, are "accursed," sent into the "eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels."

In Matthew, we have this stark contrast between the blessed and the accursed. And anyone who reads it or hears about it can't help but wonder who's who – which one am I, in the eyes of God?!?

You, my friends, are the blessed. We all are, by the grace of God, apart from anything we could ever try to do to earn it. No one is worthy of salvation, no one receives God's grace because of what they do or don't do. And few if any in this world are deserving of damnation, of being accursed.

Listen to what Jesus says to those on his left, the goats. "... I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 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."

These are not people who sometimes do good and sometimes fail to do good. These are people who have the means to help someone, they see the need, they consider helping, they decide they really could help, and they refuse. How many people do you know who are actually like that, people who do evil for evil's sake. These people are like the restaurant owner in the following story.

A poor, hungry man was walking down a village street.... He had only a piece of bread in his hand. He came to a restaurant where he saw some meatballs being grilled. The ... meat was so near and the smell so delicious. The man held his piece of bread over the meat to catch some of its wonderful smell. As he started to eat the bread, the angry restaurant owner seized him and took him away to see the judge "This man was stealing the smell of my meat without asking permission," said the restaurant owner. "I want you to make him pay me." "(The judge) thought for a minute and then held his purse in front of the owner and shook it." "What are you doing that for?" asked the owner. "... I am paying you," he said. "The sound of money is fair payment for the smell of food."¹

Now which one of you would try to charge someone for the smell of food?!?
OK – you there – over to the left. No, I'm kidding.

¹ Raymond C. Clark, *The Tales of Nasreddin Hodja* (Brattleboro, Vermont: Pro Lingua Associates, 1991), 33.

There may be people in this world who would do such a thing – undoubtedly there are; that’s who Jesus is talking about as goats – but they are few and far between.

So we don’t have to worry about whether we are a sheep or a goat. Trust me, you’re a sheep – we all are. We are all blessed by God, recipients of God’s grace. And if you are an active member of this church – no matter how you give or participate, whether financially, with time and talents, worship and prayers – you do give to those in need. That’s a certainty.

In fact, that’s the defining quality of those who stand at the right hand of Jesus – they give without even realizing it, just by being who they are. “... Just as you did it (for) one ..., you did it for me,” says Jesus.

Jesus does not expect us to always help everyone who asks; though if you can do that, you should. But Jesus knows that we can’t always do that. Everyone has financial, physical, and emotional limitations. You, as an individual, can’t always be the one meeting the needs of the “least of these.”

But we, as the church, united in Christ, we do participate in the grace of God, both as an instrument of God’s grace and as a recipient. Those who live out their faith as followers of Christ can’t help but minister to the needs of others. We don’t even think about it; it’s just who we are, as Christians.

As Christians we are called to live as if we are responding to Jesus in all our interactions. “I was hungry ..., I was thirsty ..., I was a stranger ..., I was naked ..., I was sick ..., I was in prison....” That was me, says Jesus. In responding to the needs of others, you are responding to Jesus. It’s not about whether you are blessed or accursed. It’s about seeing Jesus more clearly!

When you look into the eyes of another human being, you are looking into the eyes of Jesus. That is our faith, as Christians. And in that faith, there is grace, for all who need it – for us, for our brothers and sisters in Christ, and for all humanity.

Let us all approach Easter this year certain that Jesus is risen and looking for ways to encounter Him in meeting the needs of others. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

We enter into the stillness of prayer and think of the days stretching out ahead of us, leading us to the glory and hope and promise of new life on Easter Sunday.

As we move toward Easter, let us give of our time to those who need an encouraging visit or a hopeful word.

O God, in the stillness of this moment, move us to see you reflected in the eyes of those in need, and then open our hearts to ease their discomfort in whatever way we can.

So let us live and so let us give through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, who taught us to pray, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we forgive
our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**