

Message for Sunday, August 20, 2023

Plymouth United Church of Christ

“A Gathered People”

(Tippe “Field trip” to rebuild connections and discuss Divine Intervention)

**Ecclesiastes 3:1-13**

**Matthew 25:31-46**

The seasons that are so beautifully interconnected in Ecclesiastes reveal to us that there is a time for everything, yet these times or seasons are largely *unknowable*. We seldom know ahead of time when we are entering a particular season in life. It is usually on the other side of an experience that we realize when and what has shifted. We heard that God makes “everything suitable for its time,” yet when we are in the midst of loss or grief, or going through a fallow time in our lives, or witnessing violence and strife, it is difficult to embrace the mystery and complexity of what is happening in front of us - or is happening “to” us. /When we step back and notice the ebb and flow, the rhythm, the *balance* that comes from such seasons, we can turn our attention to what we might change, /recognize when we are doing our best, /and notice how certain experiences made us grow or placed us on another path.

Just like the seasons described in Ecclesiastes and those we experience in our own lives, there are often seasons of want and plenty. Although we hear in Matthew’s Gospel the many ways that we might serve and attend to others, we can also pay attention to the times we have been in need - when we sought support or understanding, sustenance or acknowledgment. In such times we are reminded of our humanity and vulnerability, providing us the possibility of becoming better equipped to notice another’s need and respond with compassion.

When I was invited to come and speak with you today, I noted the connection between our Divine Intervention ministry and the fact that Tippe identifies as a “Matthew 25 church.” The Presbyterian Church USA describes Matthew 25 congregations as having “a bold vision” and notes that Matthew 25 provides us an “invitation to actively engage in the world around us, so our faith comes alive, and we wake up to new possibilities.”

Being new to the Presbyterian Church, I learned that at the General Assemblies of 2016 and 2018 it was discerned that the church should act boldly and serve compassionately those “who are hungry, oppressed, imprisoned or poor.” Since arriving at Tippe, I have been witnessing actions of compassionate service through Tippe’s ongoing missions and justice ministries in partnership with other churches and local organizations - to provide shelter, safety, and sustenance.

This active engagement in the world enlivens our faith and opens us to the potential of our communities and of ourselves as individuals. I have appreciated hearing the stories of those who serve and witnessing examples of the joy experienced when serving in

these ministries. We gain so much through caring for one another. /As we heard in Ecclesiastes, let us take “pleasure in [our] “toil.”

Both of today’s wisdom teachings reveal to us life’s range of needs and experiences and invite us to show up for all of it. These texts are paired together in the lectionary at the close of every year, and it seems appropriate to revisit them now since it provides such a great jumping off point for us to think about the Divine Intervention warming room. It also happens that what we hear from Matthew’s gospel is at the center of Christian teachings. As we explore this text, I invite you to consider: *do I recognize the Divine in the other and strive to be present to those in need?*

In Matthew, chapter 25, Jesus engages in a long discourse, attempting to convey once again all that he wants the disciples to understand – he has just told them the parable of the ten virgins and then the parable of the talents. These are the last lessons he has the opportunity to share prior to the Last Supper.

Now, Matthew’s approach tends to be to sprinkle all kinds of threats and warnings throughout his text. That’s just the way he seems to teach, and it’s easy to get distracted by all of this talk about eternal punishment, and the devil, and the end times – when Jesus will return and sort the good people from the bad people. But you’ll notice that neither the sheep nor the goats in this parable caught on to the fact that we were doing particularly good or bad things.

If you consider the context at this point in the gospel, we can imagine that Jesus is getting pretty desperate – he’s been trying to plant these lessons into the hearts and minds of his followers, of his critics, of those seeking healing, and now he’s pulling out all the stops: he drives home three parables in a row here, and we’re focused on the final one in this discourse.

If we open our hearts and minds to this text, we know deep down that Jesus is striving here to give us a wise, broad, deep and compassionate understanding of the meaning of our existence – it’s all about love.

Notice, all of the things we usually worry about and call sin he doesn’t mention once – ultimately, it’s how we treat the vulnerable, the ostracized, the people we tend to push to the margins.

This gospel is extraordinary on several levels: Jesus is saying that we find the Christ in those that we came to give Christ to – we’re focused on helping, and in fact they become Christ for us. Without hesitation, Jesus creates a complete moral equivalence between himself and human beings – *what you do to people you do to me – we are the same – this is the body of Christ*. But somehow, we don’t believe this: look at how we treat people in our country, how we allow ourselves to be divided and to hate this group or that group/this race or that religion...

***Finding Christ in those that we came to give Christ to*** - I have experienced this time and again in our warming room at Tippe. As the pastor, I am surrounded by volunteers and folks who are dedicated to being present to our guests - those we have identified as the ones in need; and yet before dinner when we circle up for a prayer of thanks, it is the prayers that our guests speak that breaks me open, it is hearing their stories during dinner, often conveying humor and resilience that illustrates the bittersweet state of being human, it is seeing pictures of the children that they miss or learning about all that unfolded prior to being on the streets. It is watching them form community anew every evening as we eat together, clean the kitchen, set up the sleeping area, watch the news or play board games. Throughout, there are gems of wisdom and moments of humor, glimpses of despair and resolve that tomorrow will be a better day.

As we reflect on Matthew's text, its amazing that salvation among the sheep sort of happens by accident – they don't even know their actions are building treasure for them in heaven – this points to the reality that it doesn't have to be conscious (for Brownie points or because Jesus told us to) – it is simply the pure act of love that is pleasing to God.

We heard this goodness echoed this morning in Ecclesiastes: *I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live.*

I think we all know people who don't come to church like we do, but who treat their neighbor better than some of us. That's what Jesus is saying. People come back with, "when did we see you hungry, when did we see you naked?" And we hear the reply, "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."

Matthew 25 illustrates the shocking depth of Jesus' love for us. His identification with "the least of these" is so profound that when we reach out to others with love and enter their pain, it is Jesus himself we are loving and embracing.

Despite the intense message about what is going to happen to the goats – to those who don't welcome the stranger or feed the hungry - that they will go to a place of eternal punishment – we know that God isn't a torturer. But God in Christ IS saying that our actions have eternal significance – *it matters what you do*. It matters whether you live a life of love or a life of selfishness. And Jesus is saying, *don't take the risk* – in a way he's motivating the disciples and we modern listeners as you would little children. The real character of God is revealed in the parable itself, where we're given the message, "love the people who can't pay you back, the people you have no reason to be good to except pure love itself."

That would be the law of perfect freedom to live in the Kingdom of God – to love and let go of the consequences – it's not that "she can pay me off" – it's not that "he can get me a job" – it's not that "she can punish me" – I'm just doing it because it's the truth.

We are made in love, we are created for love, and when we act in love, we are true to our deepest identity – it's simple! Simple, but not easy. ;)

We spend so much time avoiding this deep knowing and instead get caught up in things that Jesus never ever spoke about. In this text, Jesus brings his message home once again: it's about love.

And if you miss the point that it's about love, then you miss the meaning of your life. The real point is an invitation to eternal life, not a fear of eternal punishment. Matthew's approach is to wake us up – to urge us to pay attention – to hear the essential truth about love.

God, who is love /has created you in love /to be love and therefore, to be like God. And through community, we can support one another in aligning ourselves with this simple, (but not easy) way of being in the world. May we strive to live the kingdom here and now. Amen.