

EMBRACE OUR NEIGHBORS

Our Session recently adopted a new Mission Statement, which you will find at the beginning of the Order of Worship in the bulletin. The mission of the First Presbyterian Church of Martinsville, VA is to: Share God's love, embrace our neighbors, nurture each other. I began a three-week sermon series on our mission statement last Sunday. This Sunday, we will look at "embrace our neighbors." I want to begin my sermon by telling you the following story.

Dr. William Willimon tells this story about a Methodist minister, who once visited Cuba. He met with an official of the government, a man named Santiago. Of course, the government official was a Communist. During their conversation, the official said, "This revolution will not be judged by your standards of success. Our revolution will be judged on the basis of whether or not we've fed the hungry, clothed the naked, took in the stranger, or visited the sick. That's how we will be judged." The minister said, "Captain Santiago, are you aware that you are quoting Matthew 25?" Santiago said, "I don't know anything about that." Then, Dr. Willimon adds this comment: "What bothers me, is that Jesus knows Santiago..." (Pulpit Resource, Nov. 1996, p. 33)

Our Gospel lesson from Matthew looks to another day of judgment, "when the Son of Man comes in his glory." On this last Sunday of the liturgical year, it is traditional to ponder last things, the end toward which we are moving. Thus, not only do we affirm that Jesus is Lord and Savior, he is also Christ the King, and he will be the Judge of all. Yes, whether we want to acknowledge the truth of the matter or not, "He will come to judge the quick (i.e., the living) and the dead" – as we affirm in the Apostles' Creed.

In the end, all the nations of the world shall appear before the Judge, the King, and he will judge us one and all. And, what is the basis for the judgment? What is the single criterion by which and for which we shall be judged? Interestingly enough, it's not based on whether we acknowledged Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior – as important as that is! It's not based on whether we are baptized or members of a church. Rather, what Judge Jesus will really want to know is this: how did we treat each person we encountered, particularly, the least of these who are members of Christ's family. Here's the bottom line: did we or did we not embrace our neighbors, especially those in need?

That one factor alone, according to Jesus, will determine whether we are placed on Jesus' right side (with the sheep, which were considered to be more valuable) or with the goats over on the left. As I shared with the Tuesday Morning Bible class recently, the early Christians were called "the Way" (Acts of the Apostles 9:2) because those disciples followed Jesus, who said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." Jesus is more interested in whether or not we truly followed in his footsteps and loved the unlovely, showed compassion to the have-nots, and extended mercy and justice to those on the margins of society. Jesus our Judge will be most concerned to learn whether we put our faith into action; or, did our faith involve only our hearts and our minds but not our hands? We are called to a life of service; after all, Jesus himself came to serve and not to be served. Here's the litmus test: did we or did we not embrace our neighbors?

Here's my line of thinking over the past week or so. At first, I recoil at the note of judgment in the last days. However, I take comfort in knowing that some will get their "just desserts!" I think of those who hurt or take advantage of children and never get caught. Or those who commit a murder but are never convicted of the crime. Or the CEOs that got away with millions while their employees lost their jobs and all of their benefits. Or the terrorists, who have unleashed war on innocent people and have brought misery and poverty to their own people. The list is endless.

And, because the list is endless, it's not long before I think about you and me. What of the unkind thoughts we have had about another person? What about the nasty words we have spoken, which did not build up but instead tore down a relationship? What about the loose talk in the form of gossip, slander or criticism that we have unleashed in the world – or, just as bad, in the church? And, as Jesus said, what about all of the times we failed to do good to another; maybe we didn't bring harm to them but, at the same time, we didn't bring help either. There have been times that you and me, individually and collectively, failed to embrace our neighbors. What then?

Are we to be escorted off to the left-hand side of our Lord and take our place with all the other goats and sinners, who failed to serve Jesus because we didn't serve our neighbors in need? Peter Storey, the former bishop of The Methodist Church in South Africa, once made this observation: In the Kingdom, the humble are lifted up and the most vulnerable have pride of place. That's why you cannot ask Jesus into your heart alone. He will ask, "Can I bring my friends?" You will look at his friends and they will consist of the poor and marginalized and oppressed, and you will hesitate. But Jesus is clear: "Only if I can bring my friends." (Pulpit Resource, Nov. 2008, p. 36) Are we condemned

to eternal punishment for both our sins of commission and omission?

At first glance, that seems to be the natural consequence and fate of those, who called Jesus “Lord” but didn’t serve him because we didn’t serve the least of these members of his family. But then, we remember Who is telling this story. Yes, Jesus, the Son of Man, is the One, who will judge all the nations and peoples gathered before him at the end of time. However, this is the same Jesus, who loved us enough to die for us, who returned to us even after we had betrayed him and he forgave us. Here is the good news of the gospel: our Redeemer is our judge. Jesus is the one who laid down his life for us, who did for us that which we cannot do for ourselves, whose judgment upon us is yet another side of his unfathomable love for us.

Knowing that Jesus will judge us with love and mercy is enough to motivate us to do things differently, to do them better, to embrace our neighbors with the same love with which Jesus graciously extends to us. And, as Jesus’ story makes crystal clear, when we do love and serve and embrace our neighbors, then we might just meet Jesus face to face. If we look closely into the eyes and heart of a stranger in need whom we serve, we might discover that he or she is no stranger at all for we will see the face of pure love gazing back into our eyes. After all, to feed the hungry is to feed Jesus, our Lord and our Judge.

I have always appreciated the short poem entitled, I Sought My Soul: “I sought my soul, but my soul I could not see. I sought my God, but my God eluded me. I sought my brother, and I found all three. (Author unknown)

In her book *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott tells about her congregation, St. Andrews Presbyterian Church in Marin County, CA, which helped her to leave drugs behind and find the way when her life had been in total disarray. Here was one of the things that helped to open her eyes and turn her inside out.

She writes that one of the newest members of their church was a man named Ken Nelson who was dying of AIDS. Shortly after he started coming to church Ken’s partner died of the disease. But Ken kept coming week after week. The people in the church could see he, like his late partner, was slowly dying. Anne writes that there was a large and jovial black woman in the choir named Ranola who was as devout as you could be. She kept looking at Ken out of the corners of her eyes and was more than a little standoffish. She had been raised in the south by Baptists who had taught her that Ken’s way of life was an abomination. And so it was hard for her to really see Ken as he was. Anne said she thought that Ranola and several other members were afraid they might catch what Ken had. So they stood at a distance. But Ken kept coming and won over most of the members of the church. During prayer time he would share that even in his decline he had felt the grace and redemption of God.

One particular morning the congregation began singing “His Eye Is on the Sparrow.” The whole church stood, except for Ken who was too weak to stand. And the church began to sing: “Why should I feel discouraged? Why do the shadows fall?” And Ranola, from the choir kept watching Ken and then suddenly her face began to contort and tears came to her eyes and she left the choir, moved toward Ken, bent down and picked him up, lifting him like a white rag doll. Anne says Ranola held him next to her, as if he were her child as they all sang together: “His eyes is on the sparrow and I know he cares for me.” (Roger Lovette, *Pulpit Resource*, November 2008, p. 35)

We are called to “embrace our neighbors” – both here and especially out there, those who are in need. And when we do embrace our neighbors, don’t be surprised to discover that it is Jesus (who is our Lord, Savior, King, Judge, and Redeemer) who is embracing us in return. Let us reach out to, minister to, and embrace the least of these who are members of Jesus’ family – all to the glory of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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November 23, 2008