

WHAT WE DO FOR OTHERS

Three things:

- 1.) I do not want us to become a homeless shelter.
- 2.) I am convinced that the parable we just read came from the Jewish Apocalyptic tradition – not from Jesus.
- 3.) I am hopeful that we can stay focused on the Gospel – on the Good News of Jesus, the Christ – not on the good deeds of American “humanism” or on the appeals of Old Testament prophets and their interpretations of the requirements of Torah.

Many of you have heard such themes from me before. But it strikes some of you like the proverbial “water off a duck’s back.” Others of you hear it, but the influence of contradictory perspectives in the culture all around us erodes your awareness after a while if you are not reminded from time to time. And the reality is, if we do not keep pretty clear about who we are and what our true mission is, the muddle and the vagueness will steal our focus and leave us with controversies and cross-purposes that have neither solution nor energy enough to sustain us.

- 1.) I DO NOT WANT US TO BECOME A HOMELESS SHELTER.

There are nearly endless ways to be a sincere and dedicated Christian church. Depending on where you stop off in New Testament passages, there is ample support for this wide variety of approaches to Christian ministry. I suspect that the Holy Spirit tries to tailor each church’s focus according to its actual situation, its context, and the resources and abilities of its congregation. It is not my task to figure this out for every church. But it *is* my task – and our task together – to figure this out for our own church. So we pray and think and talk together about it all the time.

When I first came here twenty years ago (February 1, 1996), this church was at half-mast in many ways. Not to get into that, but part of the problem with any struggling organization is confusion and lack of focus. If a church does not know what it is trying to be or what it is trying to accomplish, it cannot recover. And since we were so debilitated, we were making scattered efforts in almost every direction. In this smorgasbord of conflicting purposes, we were also trying to be a shelter for the homeless. Most every morning when I came to the

church, I would find four to eight people sleeping on the patio. Some of them had already peed or pooped in the bushes. What else were they supposed to do? They couldn't hold it forever. When I arrived in the morning, they assumed that I would give them food vouchers; gasoline vouchers; let them into the bathrooms; let one or two of them take a shower in the upstairs bathroom. That is what the previous Pastor had been doing.

I know the New Testament passage about “*give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.*” The Pastor before me was far more kindhearted than I am, and he was only trying to be faithful. But he was also building this clientele, and he did not seem to realize that the news was spreading on the network of the homeless. On the other hand, this church had not *decided* to be a homeless shelter – not consciously or officially. We were not opening Mertz Hall every evening to whoever needed a place to stay. We were not organizing breadlines or all the other important services necessary to a real homeless shelter. In short, we were making a half-hearted mess of it. And at this point, it was trying to use an hour or two of my time and energy every single morning.

You understand, I know. At least I hope you do. The question is not about whether or not we want to do “good.” The question is: Do we want to do the *right* good – that is, take on the tasks *the Spirit* assigns to us? Doing genuine “good” is one of the toughest assignments on earth. It seldom happens by accident or by a single random act of kindness. Jean Valjean's story is a fairy story. One silver candlestick and he turns from a bad guy into a great saint for the rest of his life. It *can* happen – as it did on the Damascus Road. But that is once in a generation. Jesus needs some serious followers mixed in with all the gush and sentiment. And Jesus Himself, as most of us realize, was incredibly focused and intentional. And no, He did not help everybody.

Anyway, I do not want us to become a homeless shelter. I do not see myself as a trained social worker. That is not to imply that we do not need all the good social workers we can get. And we need more homeless shelters too. But they need to be planned on purpose and designed to be run efficiently and effectively. So how many homeless people have I found sleeping on our patio since I came back last May? One person, early on. I assume it was a probe. New Pastor – is it okay if we come back? You think there is no network among the homeless?

I keep meaning to ask Marie if she has forgiven me for my behavior a few Sundays ago. A man, a stranger, asked to see me

about thirty minutes before our service began. Marie did what any of you would have done; she brought him to my study. He got about two sentences out before I got straight and rude. Why does a perfect stranger show up in my study shortly before our Sunday morning worship service? Does he really think that is a convenient time for me? We are going to sit down, have a pleasant chat, and get to know each other – on Sunday morning, just before worship? He comes at that time on purpose because the time pressure will make me want to get rid of him, and the easiest way to do that is to give him what he wants. There is absolutely no reply I can make that will not lead into further conversation, and that will take more time – until he gets a chance to ask for what he wants, and by then there is no more time. Then he has me. Only, I have been around for a while and do not carry the kind of guilt that makes me need to play his game. His game is: “If you are a real Christian, you have to help me.” Only, I do not care what kind of a Christian *he* thinks I am; I have my own Lord to please. So he left in a huff in under a minute and saved us both some wasted time.

Anyway, I have not even asked you folks if we *want* to be a homeless shelter. Some of you ask me, from time to time, what we are planning to do for the homeless. A couple of you, unbeknownst to each other, asked me about that just this past week. It is clear to me that with the gifts and spiritual awareness of this congregation, we can take on smaller but tougher assignments than that. Something about *vocatio*, perhaps? And we live in the midst of a culture that for the most part has little awareness that there is a version of the Christian Faith that is not stuck in ancient creeds or superstitions or inerrant-Scripture nonsense. There is a version of the Christian Faith that is not angry at science, afraid of other religions, anti-gay, or so full of answers that it has no time for questions. And there is a version of the Christian Faith that is aware of and wants to be obedient to the guidance and presence of the Holy Spirit of our Risen Lord.

2.) I AM CONVINCED THAT THE PARABLE WE JUST READ CAME FROM THE JEWISH APOCALYPTIC TRADITION – NOT FROM JESUS.

This comment is real questionable; I know that. But where is the Gospel in this parable? Where is the mercy, the forgiveness, the love of God in this parable? Where is the invitation to relationship, the offer of a New Life, the invitation to repent and enter a New and Different WAY of Life?

You are a goat or a sheep, and there is no halfway in between. Your standing with God depends entirely on your good deeds – or your lack of them – and on nothing else. You will be judged by your good deeds alone, and if they are good enough, you will be rewarded – I presume with a chance to do more good deeds through all eternity, even though nobody in the hereafter will ever need them. And if you do not do enough good deeds, it is eternal punishment for you – punishment and torture for ever and ever, amen.

That is the formula and what was being taught by Jewish Apocalyptic literature from approximately 300 B.C. up to and through the time of Jesus' life on earth. In my view, Jesus was unable to entirely free His followers from this – the prevalent and widely accepted perspective of His time. Jesus did try. And that is a long story, better for a Disciple Band to wrestle with than to try to cover on a Sunday morning in a few minutes. Nevertheless, the Mount of Transfiguration; the many teachings that put relationship with God above good deeds (and that often use good deeds as a way into relationships as their primary purpose); the wrestling with Satan; the call to repentance; the invitation into baptism; the promise of the coming Holy Spirit: Jesus has something far greater in mind than a mere coming Judgment Day when everything will be over and settled. And for those able to notice, it has been over two thousand years now and the promised "Second Coming" has not come – even though it was clearly predicted and assumed that it would come within the lifetime of the early followers.

Prejudices hang on tightly, especially if we are afraid to challenge them. It is not easy to admit that things we have been raised and taught to believe are not entirely true. We all know this to be a real problem, and we have endless examples and illustrations. But do we imagine that nobody had such problems in Jesus' day? The struggle between Law and Gospel was huge in the first century, and continues to be for many people down to the present day. The parable we are dealing with this morning is pure Law. Some of us do not miss the fact that there is no Gospel in it.

Sometimes I have tried to "redeem" the parable a bit by pointing out that there is considerable emphasis on "one" – "*inasmuch as you have done it unto ONE of the least of these my brethren.*" If we are trying to help one other person, that might still be personal and relational. But almost always we read this parable to mean: "*inasmuch as you have done it unto hundreds or thousands of those in need.*"

I do remember that Jesus' world was populated with a hundred to a hundred and fifty million people, and that's a far cry from nearly seven and a half *billion* people. Our reality has changed. We have more than a thousand times as many people living in abject poverty today than the entire population of the world in Jesus' time. And all our efforts to be generous and kind – are they working? Despite all the appeals and programs and generosity going on since I was a little boy, are things getting better? There are countless Band-Aids, but the wounds keep spreading and going deeper.

Back to the parable. If a person helps ONE other person and leaves a hundred others unhelped, is that person a sheep or a goat? If we want to get literal, the passage says that if we have done it unto *one* of the least, we are a sheep. So the only people who go into eternal punishment are people who have never ever helped a single person in all their lives. Is that the way you have been taught this parable? That is never, ever the way this parable is used in any church I have ever heard about. And it is still a far cry from the Gospel, though perhaps it is closer to the Gospel than anything we normally hear in regard to this parable.

Years ago I remember a story about a man who was very successful here on earth. But as always happens, he died one day, and he was waiting at the Pearly Gates for Saint Peter to let him into Heaven. The Pearly Gates were busy that day, so one of Peter's Assistants was looking over this man's record. The record was disturbing. The man had been so busy becoming successful down on earth that he had never given any time or attention to helping others. Peter's Assistant looked harder and harder for some incident that might qualify this man for entrance into Heaven. Finally he found a reference to a time when, as a young man, the fellow had given a beggar a quarter for a cup of coffee. (You can tell by the price for a cup of coffee how long ago it was.) That was the only good deed the Assistant could find. He did not know what to do with this information, but finally Peter had a moment to spare and the Assistant was able to put the situation to him. "What shall I do?" he asked. Peter scratched his head, pondered awhile, and finally said: "Oh, nuts to it. Just give him back his twenty-five cents and tell him to go to Hell."

I used to tell that story on Stewardship Sunday, but then I discovered that some people thought I was being serious, so I have not used it or thought about it for years.

It is no surprise to most of us that this parable is used by the church – that is, by preachers – as a guilt-producer and a motivator in the hope that it will move people to give more and to do more for whatever cause or purpose they happen to be trying to support at the moment. I do hope it is too late for me (or any other preacher who ever comes here) to use this parable for that kind of purpose. You are not supposed to be doing what *I* think you should be doing. You are supposed to be doing what you believe *the Holy Spirit* is guiding and suggesting and inspiring you to do. And I hope you know that's supposed to cut both ways.

In any case, I strongly suspect that there is no person in our congregation who should be bothered by this parable, whether or not they think Jesus told it. Not one of you comes even close to matching the description of a person who has never ever tried to help even one other person in all your life. And clearly, if you read the parable closely, even “one” gets you in – qualifies you as a sheep and gets you into Heaven.

But that also misses the point. Is Christianity really about good deeds? Is that the only point and purpose of our Savior's coming? What about this man we were just talking about. Do we know or care who he really was or what he tried to do with his life? He spent his life trying to be successful in this world. That is obviously a crime in the eyes of a high percentage of liberal Christians. But if he was successful, did he ever do any good for others? He wasn't much for giving handouts, but did he create jobs for lots of other people as he worked to be successful himself? I have recently come from Omaha, where many people know the name Warren Buffet. From what I'm told, Warren Buffet is not very good with handouts either. But he will give millions to a charity if he believes in it. Apparently he decided a while back that Bill Gates had a foundation doing better at such things than his own, so he gave a lot of his excess money to the Gates Foundation. And the truth is, both Warren Buffet and Bill Gates have done far more good for many thousands of families than anything their charitable efforts will ever achieve: a decent salary, honorable work, a steady income, a home to live in, a career without shame – and none of it as charity; all of it as opportunity. Is that not more and better help than all the charities our society is so proud of?

To be sure, that is another reason I suspect this is not one of Jesus' parables. It is too simplistic, too moralistic, too one-dimensional to be one of Jesus' parables. No surprise then that it is the favorite of so many people who want to focus on good deeds, and who are annoyed by any suggestion that Christianity is about something much deeper: "*You must be born anew.*" The New Life in Christ Jesus begins with repentance – turning to a very different WAY of Life. Christianity is about our relationship with God, and about the way in which Jesus invites us into a WAY so different that it split Judaism right up the middle. When we make a comment like this, we should often add that Judaism has been evolving for the last two thousand years also. And not only evolving, but evolving in juxtaposition to Christianity. But that's another subject.

Christianity is not and never has been about how good we have to be. Christianity is about how good *God* is. In many places and in many ways, we keep trying to turn it around so that the focus is on how good *we* are, how loving *we* are, how hard we are trying, how much good we are doing, or at least about how much good we are *planning* to do. That is humanism; that is not Christianity. SIN – the great divide – is never about how wrong we are or how little good we are doing. SIN is about our alienation from God. SIN is about what is wrong with our love affair with God. SIN, at its core, is not about our outer behavior. It is about our true relationship with God. To be sure, our behavior reflects what is true about our relationship with God. I do not always find that a comforting thought. Nevertheless, it is imperative to remember why we are really here together. And it is not to try to get in control of each other's behavior.

We are here as a fellowship of sinners, wanting to share our experiences, our discoveries, our successes, and our failures as we each try to walk the WAY of obedience to the Holy Spirit – who is Jesus, present with us in the here and now. And that is a far cry indeed from a class on morals or a pep talk on how we can be more loving or do more deeds of kindness. Such things can well up from within if we are truly reconciled with God. But if we are trying to produce them ourselves – by our own willpower or because we think we should or because we think it would make the world a better place to live – well, that is not Christianity. That does not take a CROSS or a SAVIOR or a BAPTISM in which we die to all such hopes and efforts of our own.

3.) I AM HOPEFUL THAT WE CAN STAY FOCUSED ON THE GOSPEL – ON THE GOOD NEWS OF JESUS, THE CHRIST.

You probably think I have already made this point. I hope you are right. But I still want to comment on the good we are still hoping to do. It is human nature to want to do good. Yet we make a lot of mistakes. We have a lot of bad actors among us. Sometimes one or another of us goes really wrong, and we get surprised at how much evil we humans can be capable of if we get separated enough from our Creator. We like to hope that nothing like that could ever happen to us. I mean, we can get off track, or get arrogant for a while, or think we have been successful enough that we should get a few special privileges. Sometimes it takes a pretty strong “wake-up call” to get us back to a place where we are “teachable” and obedient again. But we do not ordinarily think it is possible for *us* to become a Hitler or a Stalin or a Mao Tse-tung.

Thirty-eight years ago, I began a serious study of astrology. It has taught me many things over the years. I am no professional astrologer; that would interfere with another calling I am rather serious about. But the two have often intertwined and enhanced each other. The ancient world thought in astrological terms and constructs, and so did the biblical writers. Astrology and the church did not become enemies until the nineteenth century, and even then, not all at once.

Along the way, of course, if you get interested in astrology, it is only natural that you get interested in other people who have charts similar to your own. The person whose chart is more similar to mine than any other I have found is a fellow born in Cincinnati, Ohio. Same year as mine and same month – November, but on the 12th instead of the 21st. Stellium in Scorpio; Uranus on an angle; Pluto on an angle; Mars and Neptune conjunct in Virgo; Saturn in Aquarius; Moon in an early air sign; Sun and Venus in a tight conjunct. All similar to my own chart. I know I am boring you, but it did not bore me – because the man’s name is Charles Manson.

Do you know the depths of your own evil well enough to know how much you need Jesus? For some of us, Christianity is not just a parlor game; it is not just a weekend club for moralistic overachievers. Jesus is life or death to us. I always lose some members from every church I have tried to serve because they are convinced that the purpose of the church is to do good deeds and to help us raise our children so they will also be good and successful citizens who will

do good deeds. Any suggestion on my part that Jesus is far deeper than that and that conversion changes us far more than our outer behavior can show makes them irate. To them, Christianity is about “love your neighbor” and The Golden Rule and that’s the end of it. For me, that is not even the beginning of it. “Love your neighbor” and The Golden Rule are things that every religion on the face of the earth shares in common – and so does every service organization, scout troop, political party, and country club.

Two men found themselves sitting next to each other on an airplane bound from Chicago to Los Angeles. At first they said nothing to each other, until the stewardess came by offering refreshments. That brought eye contact. And after the usual chit-chat, one man asked the other the usual question: “What is your profession?” “I am a Minister,” was the reply. That nearly killed the conversation, but after a while the man who had asked said, “Well, as far as I’m concerned, all of religion can be summed up in one phrase: ‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.’” They sipped their drinks in silence for a while. Finally the Minister asked, “And what is your profession?” The man sitting next to him replied, rather proudly, “I am an Astronomer. I teach Astronomy at Caltech.” “Well,” said the Minister, “as far as I’m concerned, all Astronomy can be summed up in that terrific little phrase: ‘Twinkle, twinkle, little star.’”

The Golden Rule does not sum up the significance or the meaning of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. It doesn’t even touch it. “*God was, in Christ, reconciling the world to himself.*” “*Nothing ... can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*” Just because we teach Sunday School does not mean that all of Christianity can be understood on a kindergarten level. If human life stays on its present, natural level, we are all doomed. There can be no hope for a truer, better LIFE. The transformation from this world’s realities to the realities of the Kingdom of Heaven is far greater than anything our world wants to acknowledge or consider. Why do we think the world killed Jesus? And why do we think it killed all of His best followers?

This world keeps trying to pretend that all we need is just a little adjustment – maybe a few meds; possibly a little more love from friends or family from time to time. But Jesus says, “*You must be born anew*” – we need a major conversion – and He keeps inviting us into a whole New Kingdom: where a God we never ever believed in before truly loves and forgives us.

WHAT WE DO FOR OTHERS

How do we help people? A friendly smile here or there? Maybe some good advice? A couple of bucks, if we can spare it? A little food, if they are hungry? Do we ever get and stay serious about our own religion? If *we* truly need Jesus, does *anybody else* really need Jesus? Everything important about the Christian Faith is personal and relational. Do we know that yet?

God is personal and relational. Jesus is personal and relational. Anything we ever do that truly cares about or tries to help another human being must be personal and relational, or it is just a thin Band-Aid on the surface of a life that is wounded unto death.

Jesus is life to us. We are a way station where those who know and those who want to know Jesus can gather to share the New Life He offers and invites us into. If that is not what is going on here, we are not really helping *anybody*. We are just smearing platitudes around on the surface of our wounds and theirs. Jesus is LIFE to us. And Jesus is LIFE to the people we want to help. At least that is our religion – that is what we believe. If that is what we believe, is that what we are about? If that is not what we believe, what are we doing here?