

“Contemplation and Action”

November 5, 2023

Based on Matthew 25:31-40. Jesus Tells Us What Really Matters

On All Saints Sunday, we are compelled to admit things tend to become quite a bit more clear in that moment when death begins to have its hooks in us. All of the things we think are so important suddenly fade: prosperity, prestige, even an ego-driven sense of purpose.

In that moment, when the reality of our mortality seizes our spirits, we come face to face with what it means to be utterly vulnerable, at the mercy of our Maker, afraid, and completely out of control. We do not like it!

What helps, I have found, in that moment on the precipice, is raw unfettered human companionship. Pure love. Pure grace. Genuine caring and courageous witness. Suffering in solidarity while also seeking - and finding - spiritual solace.

There is nothing quite like that moment of staring into the abyss - together - and coming through to the other side with a deepened sense of radical compassion.

We at SPC have declared ourselves committed to being and becoming people of radical compassion. An incredible commitment, to be sure. One that religious scholar Karen Armstrong describes as the fundamental commitment of all major world religions. If you want to dive into the deepest truth that forms the foundation of spiritual formation, Karen Armstrong says, you cannot do much better than cultivate compassion.

The question is, how? We cannot *think* our way to compassion. It is not a light switch that we just flip on or off. We have to practice it.

Which is what Jesus shows us, in this final parable from Matthew's Gospel, not in lofty high-minded academic rhetoric, or a set of theological principles we must all sign up for to keep us out of hell, but instead with practical actions he tells us literally usher in the very reign of God: feed the hungry, Jesus says, welcome the stranger, visit the sick and imprisoned. It's not that complicated, which is not to say that it is easy. 1 percent theory, 99 percent practice.

The impetus for this practice, Jesus is saying, while, again, being utterly practical, is not even immediately tied to outcome, as much as I wish it were. Jesus does not say, as I honestly wish he would: end world hunger, fix the broken US immigration system, abolish the prison industrial complex. At least not in so many words.

What he does say is that those of us who want to inherit the kingdom of God, which is justice and peace, might have a thing or two to learn from the actual people for whom we seek justice and peace. Depending on how closely we pay attention, a variety of lessons unfold when we decide to, in fact, do what Jesus tells us to do:

First and foremost, we get out of our own heads, and the stinking thinking that bogs down our brains and our spirits with all that is wrong *for us*. When we feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, visit the sick and imprisoned, and all the rest, we put the troubles of our own lives into better perspective and develop a deeper sense of gratitude for so much of the goodness we take for granted, or think we somehow “earned” because we are so much smarter or harder working than all of “those other people.”

And that makes us feel better. Wow, we can say, I have actually done something good for the world, something inherently altruistic, something that counteracts the violence and hate and offers some hope that goodness may yet save the day.

But if we stop there, we will have missed the deeper point. Jesus is, it turns out, asking us to *learn* a thing or two from the perspective of the hungry, the stranger, the sick, the imprisoned. Something about the faith it takes to keep on going when nothing in life comes easy. Something about the truly broken nature of the US immigration system. Something about the truly racist nature of the criminal justice system and the criminalization of poverty and addiction, even with the best intentions of so many public officers. Not coming to these realizations because we are so politically *woke* but because we have actually done what Jesus told us to do and learned directly from the people Jesus told us to learn directly from.

Which circles right back around to the vulnerability of death with which we began on this All Saints Sunday. When we feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, visit the sick and imprisoned, we learn from them how to confront our own vulnerability. We learn from them how to hold compassion for ourselves and others in our shared vulnerability in truly radical and transforming ways.

It turns out, on this All Saints Sunday, we do not have to wait for a crisis of mortality to teach us the truth of what really matters, to transform our ego-driven drive for prosperity, prestige and even purpose through the perspective of eternity.

We simply need to do, day in and day out, what Jesus says to do right here in Matthew 25: offer raw unfettered human companionship to those who continue to be vulnerable. Treat others with genuine caring and courageous witness. Suffer in solidarity while also seeking - and finding - spiritual solace. At the end of the day, at the end of our lives, this really is all that actually matters.

This is, in part, why our continued support of the Community Meal is so critical, why our Immigrant and Refugee work is so life-saving, why our decision to tithe ten percent of our congregation’s annual giving to support ministries with those who are most vulnerable must remain a priority. These ministries help us cultivate our compassion and validate our vulnerability. These ministries are, in a very real sense, the whole point of being church.

With Matthew 25 as our focus of basic human compassion, mixed with the impetus to *act* on that compassion, what a joy we will find - and have already found! What grace will be ours - and has already been! What peace

that passes understanding permeates our bodies and our spirits, even when we do face that eternal threshold and cross over, held by the Spirit and surrounded by the saints!

With Matthew 25 as our focus of basic human compassion mixed with the impetus to act on that compassion, we cannot help but live into the justice and peace that marks kinship with God and one another. We cannot help but thrive in the Reign of Love unfolding with us and through us and among us. We cannot help but pray for that Reign of Love come on earth as it is in heaven.