

## November 26

Sharing, It's Important

Matthew 25:31-46

Think back to when you were raising your children, or more recently watching grandchildren or great grandchildren. How many times did you remind them to say *please* or *thank you*? Our grandson, Ronan, went trick-or-treating for the first time this year and he didn't say, "Trick or Treat" but he did say *please* and *thank you*! Why do we encourage this behavior and others like it? We do it because we hope, through repetition and training, to create adults who are polite and gracious.

When I read this parable, I smile. Jesus often calls us children of God and in this parable he is treating us just like children. Here is what I mean. This is the last of a series of judgment parables, among them being the parables of the talents and the ten bridesmaids that we have looked at before. All of them have elements of judgment in them. All are used by Jesus to challenge people to look at their attitudes and choices. Even more, this one is challenging us to do acts of compassion until they become so much a part of us that it becomes part of our nature. Just like children are encouraged to share until sharing becomes what we do. This parable is telling us to be generous until it becomes who we are.

Too often, when we read this parable, we think it is only telling us to help those in need. My reading of it says that this parable is not specifically about acts of charity. Why I say this is the note of surprise of both the sheep and the goats at the judgment they received. If it was shared by Jesus to foster charity, we would be creating a balance sheet type of salvation. What I mean is, salvation would be a list of needs on one side and a list of moments of compassion on the other. Add them up and if the compassionate side total is greater you enter into the joy of salvation. That would make things nice and tidy. But it would not engender any surprise. You would pretty well know what was required and whether or not you were a sheep or a goat! Some of you might be on the fence wondering which way your life fell, and the answer might disappoint, but not surprise.

Yet we want this parable to be about deliberate acts of compassion. If it is, we can all point to times we have given to the food bank, taken a neighbor a meal, and other such notable things. As good as these are, it would make salvation dependent on what you did and not who

you are or what you believe. Works righteousness has been denounced for centuries. We don't buy our way into heaven.

Again, we need to focus on the surprise of both the sheep and the goats. Neither thought that what they had done had merited either condemnation, if you are a goat, or praise, if you are a sheep. We need to let go of the idea that God is the heavenly score keeper. As much as we might say to someone who is doing something special that they are earning stars in their crown, Jesus was not as concerned about starry crowns as he was about faithful and righteous people.

All of these parables in Matthew have the theme of "a life of righteousness." In this parable, he lifts up the characteristic of generosity. How do you become a generous person in the eyes of God? The only way to get there is to do it. So our challenge is to practice deliberate acts of charity until generosity becomes so ingrained in us that it becomes who we are.

There is a difference between "doing" and "being." Anyone can be generous or compassionate once in a while. I think this is why the goats were surprised. They could whip out their check books and show when they had donated to hurricane relief or given to the food bank at Thanksgiving. It is something quite different to live a life that fosters an immediate response of generosity and compassion. When your life has evolved this way, you no longer think it special, the things you do. That was why the sheep were surprised. They were being praised for just living life.

When I think about the difference between doing and being I think about people who are quick to respond when there is a need. They often are calling me about someone who is sick or who has experienced tragedy and are already coming up with plans to help them. This isn't a one-time response to helping out a friend. It is their nature to respond when there is a need. Others are willing to help if you tell them about it. The need is there but it doesn't trigger an immediate response of compassion.

There was a meeting where the needs of a family in the community came up. They had just lost their home in a fire. Even though this committee had nothing to do with missions, people were talking about this family. One person said, "We should do something." There were two responses. One person turned to me and asked if there was anything left in the budget for helping people in the community. Compassion is one of the jobs of the church and you budget for it. Two other women were already planning a yard sale, with a bake sale and getting the kids

involved in a car wash. When someone said, “Why should we do all of this? They are members of another church.” One of the women responded, “This is what churches do.” Do you sense the difference between compassionate care being something you *do* versus who you are? That is the core of this parable.

But the only way to get to this level of faithfulness is to practice. Just like children are reminded repeatedly to say please and thank you until it becomes so ingrained that it becomes their natural response, we are to practice generosity until it becomes a way of looking at life. As important as it is to practice, we don’t get credit for it!! Why? Because you can’t earn your way into heaven. It is like preparing for a test in school. You spend a lot of time studying. You don’t get credit for the studying but the results are shown in the exam. Those who expended the effort do better.

Jesus’ emphasis on obedience can be forbidding. Jesus does not instruct disciples that they should become the salt of the earth or the light of the world; he tells them they are such. Likewise, Jesus does not command his followers to hunger and thirst for justice, pursue peace, and so forth; he blesses those who do. Judgment simply brings out a reality that has been present all along. The goats may have done some good deeds but fundamentally they were not salt or light to the world. Likewise, I am sure the sheep would honestly tell you of times they were not compassionate like they know they should be. Yet, they are praised because fundamentally they are living as Jesus commands and have become light and salt to the world. And the way you become salt and light and generous is to keep working at it. You celebrate times you do respond in a faithful way without thinking. You confess when opportunities pass you by and each day you strive repeatedly to live as salt and light and joy to the world.

What I like about this parable is that ultimately it’s the little things done, done without thinking, that matter. Those praised offered a cup of cold water. Yet, in that culture, a cup of water could be the difference between life and death. Or they visited those in prison or took care of the needs of those who were downtrodden. Little things done lovingly make a great difference. To bring it to our day: the cup of cold water could be sitting with someone at our community dinner who needs to tell a story. Visiting could be stopping to see a homebound friend. Clothing the naked or feeding the hungry might be giving to the food bank or a clothing bank. You do those initially because you are supposed to! But someday, it just happens.

Let me end by retelling a bit of the story by Tolstoy about Martin the Cobbler. The story begins with a background on Martin's life. Through this window he could see only the feet of people. He was still able to recognize most people by their shoes, as he had worked with most of their shoes at least once. He had a wife, but she died, and all their children had died in their infancy except a three-year-old son. Martin however, was not destined to have a child as his son died a few years later with a fever. In grief, he denied God, wondering how He could allow such a thing to happen to him. One day a missionary visited Martin and Martin told him of his hardships. This missionary told Martin that he should live his life for God. After this encounter, Martin went out and bought a large print Testament.

He began to read the Bible, at first only on holidays, but as he read more and more it became daily. His life became full with peace and joy. After his day of work he would sit down with a lamp and read. One night, Martin read a passage about a Pharisee who had invited Jesus into his house, and in the house a woman anointed and washed Jesus' feet with her tears. Martin thought of himself as the Pharisee in that story as he was only living for himself. As Martin slept he thought he heard the voice of God telling him that He would visit him the next day.

The next morning Martin skeptically watched out his window for God. While he was searching for God he saw Stepanitch shoveling away snow. Martin invited him in for a warm drink and they talked for a while. Martin later saw a young woman outside with a baby not properly dressed for the cold. He invited her in for some food and gave her warmer clothes and money. Then he saw a young boy stealing from an older lady. He went outside and settled their argument as he extended love and compassion towards both of them.

That night while Martin wondered why God had not visited him, the three figures who he had showed hospitality to that day appeared in his home. They said that when he helped them, he was helping God. Martin then realized that God had indeed visited him.

May we practice generosity, just like children practice *please* and *thank you*. May it become such a part of us that in everyone we meet we see Christ, and shower our love and compassion on them.