



what Jesus says in Matthew 25 there is often a strong reaction to start doing calculations and justifications in our heads and hearts. Can I check any or all of the boxes next to “feeding the hungry”, “visiting the sick”, “welcoming strangers”, “visiting prisoners”, and “clothing the naked”? We might release a little sigh with every thought of donating our loose change for the community meals, sending cards to the hospitalized or homebound, donating a part of our overstuffed closets to Goodwill, and serving on mission teams and committees. We often get stumped when it comes to applying the “visiting prisoners” question. Then we wonder if the math adds up to get us on God’s “right side” with the sheep. Is the number on my “good deeds” column greater than my “careless” column? Am I eternally safe?

Since this is Jesus sharing this metaphor, does he even really care if people have faith in him, or does this passage reveal that Christian faith is optional? After all, we can all think of amazing people who sacrificially serve others but don’t profess trust in God. What are God’s real priorities? How do I know what the 30% (or so) is in my life that I need to understand or do differently? Before I go any further, let me remind you that 30% of this sermon may also be wrong in conclusion or timing. I pray that the Holy Spirit will take what is of God for each of you and make it stick in your hearts and minds. May anything else fall away by grace.

This is the last week in a series called “Better Together”. In case you didn’t notice, the 5 themes of how we are to be together as a church also reflect the five vows we take when we are confirmed or become members as adults. We promise to be loyal together through our “prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness”. The focus today is on “Serving Together”. All the ways FUMC serves the community and world with compassion and care both now and in the past is commendable. That said, it’s easy to feel tired and overwhelmed by the growing needs around us. The “least of these” – those who have unmet needs of many kinds – are growing in numbers as we get sicker, the middle class shrinks, climates become more extreme and dangerous, justice and equality is denied, and safety is threatened.

When Jesus shared his analogy of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25, perhaps he was thinking of the passage from Ezekiel 34 where the selfish sheep who focused on feeding themselves were separated from the “least of these” sheep who were underfed, bullied, weak, injured, scattered, and left to drink water made carelessly dirty.

God promises, *“I will feed them with good pasture...make them lie down...I will seek the lost, bring back the strayed, bind up the injured, strengthen the weak, feed them with justice...But the fat and the strong I will destroy.”* Verse 22 sums it up: *“I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep.”*

It is good that God is the judge and we are not for many reasons. First, we often can't see or understand things accurately. We have that “30% factor” working against us. For instance, when we see that fancy car in line at a food bank, we may not realize that its odometer is high and value upside down. We may see undocumented immigrants and think they were unwise to take such a risk, but not understand the lack of options they had or persecution they faced. We may hear of overcrowded prisons and wonder why they made such bad choices, and not understand the systemic inequalities for people of color and the poor. It is often difficult to see and understand much of the hidden disabilities, traumatized personalities, or limited functionalities of those whom God calls us to serve.

It is also easy to miss that “unawareness” is a key part of the story Jesus shared. When the king separates the sheep and the goats, the righteous sheep *“are unaware of what they have done. ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry?’”* Serving others is not true service when it is done in a calculated way to earn God's favor or increase our self-esteem. True service is a sign of a relationship with Christ who said, *“Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”* – Matthew 20:26-28

Similarly, those on the king's left are also surprised to learn that they encountered him in the “least of these”. They missed it, completely unaware because they were looking out for their own interests. It is a sign of their lack of relationship with Christ and his way of love and mercy. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer puts it, “Self-justification and judging others go together, as justification by grace and serving others go together.”

There is another often-missed part of this parable. Even though the king sorts and tends to the sheep individually, he addresses them together. All of the discourse is in the plural “you” and “we”. It implies that God designed us to serve together. When Jesus sent out

his followers to witness and serve, he sent them in pairs and groups. Yes, we can certainly serve in individual ways, but there is greater strength and effectiveness when a variety of people are serving collaboratively with their diverse gifts.

Here's an example: there is a great need now and for many months in the future as people in eastern Iowa recover from the devastating windstorm. The most vulnerable there have lost the most – their homes may not have been as strong, their insurance policies not as comprehensive (or existent), and their tools not as helpful (like generators and chainsaws that are hard to find and afford). I'm thankful to hear reports of people with the gift of knowing how to safely fix fallen powerlines serving for long hours, alongside people with the gift of preparing meals for hundreds on their grills, and a 14 year old girl with administrative gifts serving as the "CEO" of the Derecho Relief Center in Cedar Rapids. I'd like to add the gifts we have in our church to help serve our Iowan neighbors in crisis. I'm planning for a mission trip to take place sometime in October, so please contact me if you're at least 12 years old and interested. We need people willing to serve with gloves on, whether those be work gloves, oven mitts, or surgical gloves. It is complicated by COVID-19, so we'll need extra passion, prayer, and precautions.

There are many other ways we can be serving together as a church. Whether it is stocking or serving at the Personal Needs Closet, developing a new Pet Needs Pantry, checking in and helping those who are alone, building ramps, preparing Community Meals, or serving on teams to fulfill our church's mission, we have many ways to be serving together even when we have to be physically distanced. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Everybody can be great...because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love."

Christ wants us to be more aware of his love for us and his love for the "least of these". After he washed the dirty feet of his followers, he said, "*I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.*" – John 13:15-17. How is Jesus calling you – and us – to the blessing of serving together? Let us do so with grace, humility, and love!