

March 7, 2021
Suddenly You Are Doing the Impossible
Matthew 25:31-46

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Jesus challenges us to see everyone as He sees them – as a precious child of God. More than that, Jesus invites us to see everyone as we would see Jesus, Himself. To treat everyone as we would treat Jesus. One writer comments: *"Every group we meet, work with or live among, has those who are the 'least'. It can be the one in the family who is suffering from addiction, the confused and angry teenager who is always in the wrong, the person who is sidelined in work. There are countries who are 'least' in the eyes of the rest of the world, where millions have less than basic human rights. In all these 'leasts' there is the real, healing and intense presence of Jesus. God is very present among the very poor. God calls us to notice the neglected and to have compassion for the weakest."*

Whose Side Is Jesus On?

God describes living out our faith a bit differently than we might expect. For many of us, who have spent years in the evangelical church, important things we do for Jesus might include believing sound doctrine, having a quiet time, and going to church. This text creates problems for us because it goes beyond a "believe-in-the-Lord-Jesus-and-you-will-go-to-heaven-when-die" kind of faith. This text says our compassion, mercy, and practical acts of service are really, really important, too.

In this parable, Jesus says there is a direct link between following Jesus and treating people – even difficult people – with great dignity and respect. How you deal with people matters. You treat them like you would treat Jesus.

Jesus identifies six basic human needs: food, drink, shelter, clothing, healthcare, and companionship. Let's think globally for a moment. In this parable, it is "*the nations*" who are evaluated, not individual people. How do we as a nation – Canadians – score on treating needy nations? How do we respond to the hungry, poor, naked, prisoners, and lonely on a global scale? Just a tiny fraction of our national budget is given to development in poorer parts of the World. No provincial money is. We excuse ourselves, "We have poor people in our own country – when we've fixed our own problems, we'll care for others." In this parable, does Jesus give us that wiggle room? Do we treat poorer nations as if their residents were Jesus?

If you're like me, you want to sputter, "but, but , but ..." However, in this parable, Jesus clearly picks a side. There are no "buts." He's in the corner of the hungry, poor, destitute, needy, and lonely. People. Nations. "*If you did it for the least of these, you did it for me. In help given, you have helped me. In help withheld you have withheld it from me.*" My western evangelical framework struggles, because that's not this side I'm drawn to. But this parable draws me up short. Jesus offends me. He intends to.

Having said that, as a church, we can, and do, partner with missionaries and agencies to help alleviate poverty and suffering, globally and locally. We do try to make a difference in the name of Jesus. In Lethbridge, we actively support our Soup Kitchen, Food Banks, Homeless Shelter, and affordable housing. That's all good. We are not too bad at providing 5 of those 6 needs – food, drink, shelter, clothing, and healthcare to people in our own community – they just cost money. And money is, relatively, easy to give.

Think about the sixth need, companionship. That can be much harder. Covid has highlighted that the need for companionship really is a big deal. True friendship. Someone who will listen. Someone who can give time. Someone who really cares. That may be a way we can make a real difference in our community, too.

As We Go About Our Lives

The message of this parable for us, in Lethbridge, is NOT that we have to go looking for folks with needs (though this is great thing, and many people do). But, in the course of our daily lives, as we all meet people. Do we treat them as we would treat Jesus? Caring for these people is like caring for Jesus. Do we do it?

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- As you plan your retirement or leisure time, what values determine your choices?

Through the course of our daily lives, there are opportunities to care, in the name of Jesus. To encourage, in the name of Jesus. To call, in the name of Jesus. We can start there. We can share the love of God as we live, moment by moment, day by day.

- We share the love of God by what we do.
- We share the love of God by how we react.
- We share the love of God by how we listen.
- We share the love of God by how we pray.
- We share the love of God by how we spend our time.
- We share the love of God by what we don't say.
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Many of you are so good at these things already. Are we a caring church? A church that shares the love of Jesus? Yes. What Covid has shown us is that these things happen as we simply live out your faith in small ways, like a call or a card. We share the love of Jesus through the gifts – of time, energy, opportunity – that come our way. And we use our abilities, talents, tithes, and gifts to make a difference in the world.

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How do I begin?

Begin – as we always should – with prayer. Ask God to help you see the opportunities to share his love through those daily gifts you already have. Mother Teresa comments, *"Everything starts from prayer. Without asking God for love, we cannot possess love and still less are we able to give it to others. We can talk so much about prayer and yet not actually pray."*

The ordinary events of our lives can become extraordinary events when we invite God to show us opportunities we have to share God's love to our neighbours.

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In this parable, Jesus says there is a direct link between following Jesus and treating people – even difficult people – with great dignity and respect. How you deal with people matters. You treat them like you would treat Jesus.

Jesus identifies six basic human needs: food, drink, shelter, clothing, healthcare, and companionship. Let's think globally for a moment. In this parable, it is "*the nations*" who are evaluated, not individual people. How do we as a nation – Canadians – score on treating needy nations? How do we respond to the hungry, poor, naked, prisoners, and lonely on a global scale? Just a tiny fraction of our national budget is given to development in poorer parts of the World. No provincial money is. We excuse ourselves, "We have poor people in our own country – when we've fixed our own problems, we'll care for others." In this parable, does Jesus give us that wiggle room? Do we treat poorer nations as if their residents were Jesus?

If you're like me, you want to sputter, "but, but, but ..." However, in this parable, Jesus clearly picks a side. There are no "buts." He's in the corner of the hungry, poor, destitute, needy, and lonely. People. Nations. "*If you did it for the least of these, you did it for me. In help given, you have helped me. In help withheld you have withheld it from me.*" My western evangelical framework struggles, because that's not this side I'm drawn to. But this parable draws me up short. Jesus offends me. He intends to.

Having said that, as a church, we can, and do, partner with missionaries and agencies to help alleviate poverty and suffering, globally and locally. We do try to make a difference in the name of Jesus. In Lethbridge, we actively support our Soup Kitchen, Food Banks, Homeless Shelter, and affordable housing. That's all good. We are not too bad at providing 5 of those 6 needs – food, drink, shelter, clothing, and healthcare to people in our own community – they just cost money. And money is, relatively, easy to give.

Think about the sixth need, companionship. That can be much harder. Covid has highlighted that the need for companionship really is a big deal. True friendship. Someone who will listen. Someone who can give time. Someone who really cares. That may be a way we can make a real difference in our community, too.

As We Go About Our Lives

The message of this parable for us, in Lethbridge, is NOT that we have to go looking for folks with needs (though this is great thing, and many people do). But, in the course of our daily lives, as we all meet people. Do we treat them as we would treat Jesus? Caring for these people is like caring for Jesus. Do we do it?

Last week, we talked about "gifts" God has given us –skills, relationships, opportunities, talents, and abilities. We all have these gifts. The question is how will we use them?

- As you try to cope with the classmate who drives you crazy, how do you react?
- As you talk with the friend whose marriage is falling apart, what do you do?
- As you shovel the snow off your own walk, what about your neighbour's?
- As you think about the person you haven't seen for a while, what do you do?
- As the name or face of a missionary comes to mind, how do you respond?
- At work, do you really listen to what your colleagues are saying about their lives?
- As you plan your retirement or leisure time, what values determine your choices?

Through the course of our daily lives, there are opportunities to care, in the name of Jesus. To encourage, in the name of Jesus. To call, in the name of Jesus. We can start there. We can share the love of God as we live, moment by moment, day by day.

- We share the love of God by what we do.
- We share the love of God by how we react.
- We share the love of God by how we listen.
- We share the love of God by how we pray.
- We share the love of God by how we spend our time.
- We share the love of God by what we don't say.
- Sometimes we even share the love of God by what we do say.

Many of you are so good at these things already. Are we a caring church? A church that shares the love of Jesus? Yes. What Covid has shown us is that these things happen as we simply live out your faith in small ways, like a call or a card. We share the love of Jesus through the gifts – of time, energy, opportunity – that come our way. And we use our abilities, talents, tithes, and gifts to make a difference in the world.

A Christianity Today article tells this story of our Baptist brothers and sisters in Lebanon: "Baptists worked alongside Church of God, Armenian Evangelical, Brethren, Alliance, and Presbyterian leaders to reach as many of the needy as possible. They found that it wasn't easy ministering to desperate people who had lost everything. The refugees expressed frustration with having to live with 30 to 40 strangers in a single room. "They were stuck with each other, and sometimes they fought," Nabil Costa (who heads a Christian organization in Lebanon) said. "We helped them solve their problems. We earned credibility. We didn't just bring food and water and say goodbye. We wanted to make a difference in their lives." Besides offering relief, volunteers listened, offered Christian-based entertainment, and provided counseling.

Costa recounted a story involving a Baptist youth minister who met the father of a 17-year-old Shiite youth killed in an Israeli air strike on a southern Beirut suburb. During the burial ceremony, Israeli jets attacked the funeral procession and sent mourners scurrying to safety. Later, the father asked the youth minister, "Why are Christians helping Muslims?" The minister shared the story of the Good Samaritan and asked, "Who was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The father responded, "The one who had mercy on him." The youth minister then recited the

words of Jesus in Matthew 5: "But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven." Touched, the father of the deceased boy said, "We have many Christian friends. But we never knew that you have these teachings."

How do I begin?

Begin – as we always should – with prayer. Ask God to help you see the opportunities to share his love through those daily gifts you already have. Mother Teresa comments, *"Everything starts from prayer. Without asking God for love, we cannot possess love and still less are we able to give it to others. We can talk so much about prayer and yet not actually pray."*

The ordinary events of our lives can become extraordinary events when we invite God to show us opportunities we have to share God's love to our neighbours.

In the early 13th century, Francis, the son of a wealthy silk merchant, was moved with compassion for the poor and suffering he met in the streets and countryside around his home of Assisi, Italy. Moved by God, he chose to dedicate his life to walking in the footsteps of Jesus, sharing the good news of God's love by deed and word. He and his followers covenanted to "to go and proclaim that the Kingdom of God is at hand." Not many of us are called to be monks. But we can all share the good news of God's love by deed and word.

Francis counseled his brothers: *"Preach the Gospel – if necessary, use words."* Francis also said, *"Start by doing what's necessary; then do what's possible; and suddenly you are doing the impossible."*

Great advice for us. We serve God as we live together, in our families, our church, and in our community. Let us live the gospel – loving one another in our home, church, and community with the love of Jesus.

Start by doing what's necessary; then do what's possible; and suddenly, we might discover, we are doing the impossible.

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