

## **Sermon Notes – November 22, 2020**

Matthew 25: 31-46

We know from studying the scriptures that “love of God” and “love for one another” are priorities in the kingdom of God for us as Christians. ***How we treat others is a reflection of our relationship with Christ and a demonstration of our love for him.*** Taking care of the poor, the homeless, the widowed, the orphaned – those were important priorities to Jesus and even in the Old Testament to God. If you go back and look in the Old Testament, in Deuteronomy 15, God told Moses to tell the Israelites to take care of the poor – “You’ll always have the poor in the land. Always be open handed to the poor and the needy. Give to them generously and not begrudgingly.” In Leviticus 19, these words were given to Moses by God to the Israelites, “Make sure when you harvest your crops, if you’re doing the grapes, leave some grapes on the ground for the poor. If you’re gleaning the fields, leave some at the edge – some of the produce and gleanings at the edge of the field - so that the poor can receive charity with dignity.” In the New Testament, we know that Jesus told the disciples to take care of the widowed and the orphaned and the poor, ***and Jesus was always there noticing people’s needs and responding. It’s an important priority to God that we take care of the least of these, whoever they are – family, friend, stranger – whoever our neighbor is.***

I want you to think about something that Dr. Barbara Brown Taylor said in her commentary on this scripture. Jesus wants us to see every person as if Christ is there in disguise. God created every one of us and we’re created in the image of God. How we treat others – remember that Christ is in that person - when you do it to them, you do it to Christ and Christ sees and notices. Dr. Barbara Brown Taylor is an Episcopal minister, a book author and a college professor. She and her husband live in Georgia on a farm. In one of her books, she said something very profound about this passage of scripture; she said, **“We are called to look at each other and see Christ. That is as easy and simple and yet hard as it can be.”** Can you imagine? It is hard to always treat every person as if they were Christ, isn’t it? ... to treat them the way we want to be treated? ... the

way that Christ taught us to treat one another? But Barbara Brown says, “We are called to look at each other and see Christ. It’s as simple and as hard as that.”

Mother Teresa was a Catholic nun and she died several years ago at the age of about 87. But, she worked with the poor in Calcutta, India for years and years. One time she was interviewed when she was visiting in the United States and she told the reporter, “At the end of life, we will not be judged by how much money we have, by the number of diplomas we have, or all the great things we have done in life; we will be judged by this: I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was sick and you ministered to me. I was naked and needed clothing and you gave it to me.” It’s important how we treat others and deal with those different from us. It may be somebody in our family, it may be a stranger, but Jesus asked us to treat people with kindness and hospitality.

There’s a story, an Irish legend, about a king that was looking for an heir to the throne. He and his wife, the Queen, did not have any children. So, as he was approaching his old age, he worried about an heir to the throne. He told his servants to go out into all the villages and the towns in his kingdom and post a sign that said, “The king is looking for a man to be the next heir to the throne. But there are two requirements for that man: he must have a love for God and a deep love for his neighbor.” He told them that anyone could apply for the job and the king would call them for an interview. There was a man who lived in the kingdom – a young lad in his twenties who was very poor; he didn’t have a lot of food or nice clothing but he wanted to apply for the job. He really felt he had a deep love for God and for other people. So he wanted to go on the journey to the king’s palace and apply to be the rising heir to the throne. But he needed some new clothing, so he borrowed some clothes from a neighbor. He worked long and hard to get enough rations and food to carry him for two days to the king’s palace. When he was about two hours from the palace, (he could see the palace on the mountain in the distance) - and as he’s walking along the dirt road, he sees a poor beggar on the side of the road. The man says, “Sir. Sir. Please help me! I’m

hungry and I'm so cold! Please help me! Don't you have some food you can spare? Can't you give me some clothing to keep me warm?" He began to walk past the beggar, but he turned around and came back. He took off his outer coat and he gave it to the beggar and he took the beggar's holey, tattered coat and put it on. He took the rations he had (his food rations for his return trip home from the palace) and he gave it to the poor beggar. Off he went on his trip to the palace. He said to himself, "Man, I'm not very presentable. I've got on this holey tattered clothing. I look dirty and sweaty after two days and now I have no food for my return trip home." But he proceeded to the palace and the soldiers greeted him. They took him to a visiting area and sat him down and said, "The king will interview you shortly." About two hours later, the soldiers came and got him and took him before the king. He bowed down before the king and when he opened his eyes and looked, he said, "You're the guy! You're the guy on the street! You were the beggar!" "Yes," said the king, The young man said, "Why did you do that to me?" The king replied, "You remember the requirements for the heir is a love of God and a love of your neighbor? You gave your coat to me on the street. You gave me all the food you had. Come now into the palace. You have proved your love of God and love of neighbor." His servants came and brought him a new coat, gave him food, and they put the king's royal coat on the young man. The king said, "Welcome to my kingdom."

You see Christ calls us to love and to share kindness to people whoever they are, God's love is indiscriminate; He shares and offers his love to the good and the bad alike and he calls us to treat each other with kindness - no matter who we are, where we are on our spiritual journey, whether we're believers or unbelievers - to treat people with kindness and love. What is he saying in this passage of scripture? ***He's saying that we are to see others and see the image of Christ in them as if Christ is seeing us - and if we do it for somebody else, we're doing it for him. And one day it's our actions that are going to matter - how we've treated other people is going to really matter.***

In the story, Jesus said that the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. Now in ancient times, in Palestine, it was not unusual for sheep

and goats to be together. But at night they would separate them because the sheep had thick wool - the goats didn't - and so they'd put them in a warmer place to stay warm in the cold winters. Also the sheep and goats were separated when the sheep had to be sheared. It was not unusual to separate them. *Jesus compares the sheep to the righteous - those who are the believers in Christ - those who are living for him and showing it by their actions - and he compares the goats to those who are non-believers - those who are the pretenders - those who say they care about people, but they don't show it with their actions. **Jesus calls us to be the sheep who show his love and kindness to all people.***

Dr. Kenneth Carter is a Methodist minister in Georgia, and he shares a story in one of his books about a man in his church that was really active in the homeless shelter in their local town. He said that man was so active, he went almost three nights a week to the homeless shelter to serve food or to spend the night with the homeless. He said the reason that this church member did it was because he had a brother who was homeless. He told the Pastor that his brother who lived in the Pacific Northwest had mental illness, and he had paranoid delusions, and those delusions caused him to be homeless and to wander from one homeless shelter to another. He said, "Dr. Carter, when I go in the homeless shelter and serve, every man that I serve, I view him as though he could be my brother, and I want to treat him as though he could be."

That's what Christ calls us to do as Christians - to treat other people with kindness and love. ***Christ always responded to the needs of people and he calls us to do that, too.*** Sometimes it won't require us to spend money. Sometimes it doesn't require a lot of resources. It may be that all he's calling us to do is to listen to somebody who's grieving the loss of a loved one; maybe it's to carry in the trash can or to mow the grass for somebody who had surgery. Maybe he just wants us to pray with somebody; maybe it's to take a dish of food. ***We don't know what it is, but whatever kindness you and I do, Christ sees it and notices.***

Did you notice in the story that the sheep (the righteous/believers) - Jesus said, "When I was hungry, you fed me. When I was thirsty, you gave

me something to eat - (in other words, whenever you did it for somebody else,)" and the sheep came back and asked him, "But, Lord, when did we see you do that? When did we see you hungry and give you something to eat or thirsty?" And Jesus said, "Whenever you've done it to one of the least of these, you've done it unto me." ***Jesus wants our meeting the needs of others and responding to the poor and the suffering and the widowed and the orphaned and all that to be second nature to us. It flows out of our relationship with him. It comes out of our love for Jesus Christ.*** You know some people think that serving the needy and the suffering is a ticket to heaven. Your ticket to heaven is believing and living for Christ, but one day, Christ will look at our actions to see if they match our words. **So, will we be a sheep or a goat - a believer, an unbeliever, or a pretender - or the real righteous who live for him and show it by our actions - showing love and kindness?**

What did the prophet say in Micah 6:8: "What does the Lord require of you? ... to act justly, to love mercy and kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." May we go forth, remembering what Dr. Barbara Brown Taylor said, "God has called us to look at each other and see Christ. It's as simple and as hard as that -- because it's not always easy to love and care for people." May God help us to love even the "least of these" - whoever they are. Amen.