“***The Least of These***” by S. Finlan. The First Church, Nov. 22, 2020

**Matthew 25:31–45**

31“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. 32All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, 33and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. 34Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 35for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ 37Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? 38And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ 40And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ 41Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me . . . 42for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ 44Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ 45Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’”

Let’s look where this passage begins. It starts with the return of Jesus to earth and his sitting on “the throne of his glory” (25:31). It is a judgment scene, but with a strong personal touch. His pronouncements are not legal or governmental, but are intensely personal and emotional. He gives this passionate message about the practice of compassion and ministry to the needy.

It is a strong mandate for *us* to practice active compassion towards the hungry, the poor, the sick, the lonely, and the imprisoned because Jesus is able somehow to be present within them. I am particularly drawn to the passage about the lonely, when he says “I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (25:35).

We need to look at all people as members of Jesus’ own family. If we truly love Jesus, we will be good to his family members, which means every human being. If we did not do good to the least of his children, we did not do it to him. We should extend a helping hand to everyone who needs help, to the sick, the hungry, the heartbroken, the imprisoned. I have an example of someone who did this.

There was a wealthy businessman in Portland, Duncan Campbell, whose life felt empty to him. He decided to start a mentoring program to help problem kids in elementary school in a poor neighborhood. The kids in his program went on to graduate high school at an 85% rate, even though the graduation rate in that area was only 40%. And these were the most troubled kids to start with. “That’s the power of a friend” Duncan said (Donald Miller, *A Mission Miles in a Thousand Years*, 175). The program, Friends of the Children, is going strong in 22 locations across the country and in England. The author of the book where I read about this was inspired to form his own group, the Mentoring Project, for fatherless children, which also is starting to spread to other cities (Miller, 176). So, “When was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you?” (Matt 25:38). Well, when you saw some children who needed a mentor.

Here in West Bridgewater, our church participated in contributing to a campaign to help erase medical debt. This was a passionate cause for a number of Southeast New England UCC folks, and they joined with other regions to take action. UCC churches together eliminated $26 million of debt. First Church, itself, has had an ongoing ministry over the years of making donations to the local Food Bank, and giving Christmas presents to the poor.

Are there other ways that our church could welcome the stranger, feed the poor, or clothe the naked? I think our Bible studies meet a certain need. Now, Jesus does not say “I was hungry for truth, and you fed me,” but I think it would fit well with the other sayings, and it is a legitimate need, too. Are there other forms of educational outreach we could attempt? Those who love truth and can impart a love of learning to adults, young or old, are rendering a profound service to the cause of civilization.

Another thing that would fit with what Jesus said here would be “When were you grieving and sad, and we sat with you?” It is important for us to be present and loving with people who are grieving. This has been a year for that! Maybe we are grieving now, or are sad for friends who have lost loved ones. Let the tears roll out. Let the memories be shared. Let people experience the emptiness that comes with loss. It is a little less empty if there is someone who provides a loving presence. I have heard this loving presence compared to an aspect of bagpipe playing. You can play a melody with the chanter or melody pipe, but you also need to play the drone, a continuous note that never stops. I have heard loving presence compared to the drone, an ever-present sustained note. I can imagine Jesus saying “inasmuch as you sat with someone who was grieving, you sat with me.”

Are there forms of service we can really get behind, that would render real help to others, service activity which also would help us to feel connected and purposeful? Through our service, God helps us find our place in the world. Service makes life meaningful. But outward service has its limits. The author I mentioned a moment ago, Donald Miller, was concerned about conflict in the Congo, but he wrote: “Nothing is going to change in the Congo until you and I figure out what is wrong with the person in the mirror” (excerpt from *Blue Like Jazz*, printed at the end of *A Million Miles*, 287).

That brings it on home to you and me, and what there is inside us that blocks our compassion, that makes us hard-hearted or cynical. Sometimes we do or say things that we are ashamed of later. But I think that shame is the beginning of wisdom. It may be our souls wishing to repent and to return to connectedness to God. As Paul said “you have come to know God” (Gal 4:9), and as Peter said, “you have come to trust in God” (1 Pet 1:21). When you can affirm this, then you can always feel your renewed connection to God, the *source* of compassion, and you will see *your* compassion renewed. Jesus seeds and waters our compassion.

Where does *your* compassion move you to go? What breaks your heart and makes you want to take action? Where might you get chances to minister to the least of these, and therefore to Jesus himself? Compassion is the mandate, and the proof of our loyalty. I would like to hear Jesus say “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink” (25:34–35).

Maybe even our mundane encounters at the grocery store are opportunities to minister. Maybe every encounter is sacred, because every person is sacred. Our ordinary activities can be filled with compassion. Maybe we can play that note of compassion through the day, every day.