

“A Voice for those Who Have No Voice”

Matthew 25:31-40

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Today's worship and sermon continue our focus on the Grace Covenant around which our congregation gathers. Today, we focus on our promise to "be servants of God to all who have given up hope, working for peace and justice among all people, seeking to become a voice for those who have no voice."

Take a moment with me this morning to take a brief trip into your imagination. Let me warn you before we take off, that this trip will not be on the order of the old television series, *Fantasy Island*. Rather than putting us in the company of the rich and famous, this trip will take us the other direction. It will put us shoulder to shoulder with or, more exactly, it will ask us to walk in the shoes of the poor and unknown. Our conditions of travel will not be first class; but hopefully, they will put us in touch with the one in whose name we gather.

Can you imagine your own family living in poverty? Can you imagine waking up every day in a tiny, unventilated room, where everyone is struggling for breath? Can you imagine living in a home where disease-carrying insects infest thatch walls and the mud floors melt into a grimy cesspool every time it rains? Can you imagine a four-mile walk to get to the nearest clean water? Or, closer to where we live, paying so much for housing that you have no money left for food or healthcare or reliable transportation available to the only job you can find? Can you imagine working full time at minimum wage but having to work 84 hours a week to afford a two-bedroom apartment at Fair Market Rent?

As difficult as it is to imagine, every morning 1.6 billion people wake up in poverty housing; and another 100 million are homeless. Lacking access to adequate shelter, clean water or sanitation, more than 10 million people die each year from preventable diseases—the numerical equivalent of losing the population of the state of Michigan every year. Many of those who die are infants.

Reading these numbers and viewing the slide show put together by the Slam the Door on Poverty campaign being waged by Habitat for Humanity and a coalition of other agencies and world leaders, I was reminded of my encounter some 30 years ago with Harvard University Professor John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*. Seeking to define justice as fairness, Rawls proposed an exercise of the imagination. Those seeking to determine laws or actions essential to basic fairness are instructed to make their determinations from behind a "veil of ignorance," not knowing what position they occupy in a society or the personal impact the decision will have upon their own situation. Imagining that they might be among the disadvantaged of society rather than the advantaged, they are prone to search for actions that will benefit the disadvantaged. Put more simply, it is not unlike the wise parent who instructs a child to break a highly desired treat in two with the full understanding that the child's sibling will have first choice of the two pieces. Imagining oneself on the short end of the treat does wonders for one's dedication to equity and fairness.

God comes to us "in the distressing disguise of the poor." If the principle of self-interest, that we might come up on the short end of the stick, is a good principle for measuring justice in a society, faith calls us beyond focusing on our self interest to a basic understanding about where we meet God. In the words of Mother Theresa, God comes to us "in the distressing disguise of the poor." Israel's repeated refrain throughout scripture to care for the poor, the widow, the disadvantaged, the stranger rests solidly on the reminder of who they were and where they were when God met and delivered them. "Remember," the Torah insistently repeats, "you were slaves in Egypt. Therefore, you should be able to stretch your imaginations to identify with the needs of the slave and the vulnerable among you." The prophet Isaiah looks beyond Israel's borders and sees the international implications of Israel's mission of justice: "I [God] have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring . . . from the prison those who sit in darkness" [42:6-7]. Proverbs commands, "Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute. Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy" (31:8). More recently, Proverbs' command was picked up by churches in Latin America. Standing in the midst of the terrible injustice and blatant violence being wreaked upon the masses, voices from within the church pledged themselves at great personal and institutional peril to become "the voice of those who have no voice."

With both feet planted firmly in the rich tradition of the Jewish people, the Gospel of Matthew insists on the *doing* of God's will. "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven" [7:21]. Calling Jesus "Lord" was the basic confession of the early church, but it is not enough. Nor is prophecy or exorcism or miraculous deeds or being fastidious enough to tithe the herbs from one's garden. No, in the story we call the Parable of the Last Judgment, Matthew reaches back into the treasure trove of his religious heritage: "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, I was naked and

you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me. . . . Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” [25: 35-36, 40].

God comes to us in the disguise of the poor. The question for us: do we have eyes to see and the readiness to respond?

God’s overwhelming grace commissions us to a ministry of love and justice. A word of caution as we proceed: we should not jump to the conclusion that Matthew is advocating a new legalism—one measured in terms of good deeds to others rather than the old legalism focused upon parsing words and straining at gnats. Even if the new strain of legalism is better than the old, it still misses the mark. Notice the element of surprise in the story of the Great Judgment: “Lord, *when* did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or sick or in prison and care for you?” [37-39]. The motivation for the behavior of these now judged righteous apparently has nothing to do with seeking a reward. Moved by compassion, they have encountered others in need and simply responded. Far from the burdensome work of earning their salvation or proving their own goodness, their acts of kindness spring from a wealth of grace that bubbles up from within and enables them to reach out in grace to others.

Writing to encourage churches toward becoming welcoming congregations, Paul Wadell contrasts the familiar disease of *xenophobia* (fear of those who are different) with the church’s calling to be a culture of *xenophilia* (embracing in love those who are different). Fear, he suggests, constricts our world, causing us to pull back, to become wary of others and disengaged. Fueled by anxiety, fear teaches us to take care of our own needs before tending to the needs of others. “In a culture of fear, the open hand of hospitality easily becomes the clenched fist of hostility. . . . and the very things we have traditionally called sins or vices (hoarding, greed, suspicion) become wise and prudent virtues” [*Christian Reflection—Hospitality*, p. 76].

Existing in the midst of a culture of fear, the church is called to form an alternative culture that exhibits “the table manners of Jesus.” *Here* we immerse ourselves in “the story of a God who is passionate about justice to the poor, vigilant in concern for widows, orphans, and refugees, and jealously protective of the vulnerable of the world.” *Here* we remember together God’s justice, mercy, compassion, forgiveness and endless generosity, not in order to walk away from this place and forget, but in order to reenact them in the lives we live and the decisions we make every day. “Any love,” Waddel concludes, “modeled on the divine love cannot be cautious, narrow, or safe. It must always be willing to make room for the other, especially those others who come to us hungry, forsaken, homeless, or alone.”

“We will be servants of God to all who have given up hope,” we promise in our covenant, “working for peace and justice among all people, seeking to become a voice for those who have no voice.” Empowered by the gracious love of God, let us exert every fiber of our being into translating those words into transforming actions on behalf of God’s children who need us most.