

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk
(Delivered on Sunday, November 26, 2017)

Text:

Matthew 25:31-46 *The Inclusive Bible*

“At the appointed time the Promised One will come in glory, escorted by all the angels of heaven, and will sit upon the royal throne, with all the nations assembled below. Then the Promised One will separate them from one another, as a shepherd divides the sheep from the goats. The sheep will be placed on the right hand, the goats on the left.

“The ruler will say to those on the right, ‘Come, you blessed of my Abba God! Inherit the kin-dom prepared for you from the creation of the world! For I was hungry and you fed me; I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me; naked and you clothed me. I was ill and you comforted me, in prison and you came to visit me.’ Then these just will ask, ‘When did we see you hungry and feed you, or see you thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you as a stranger and invite you in, or clothe you in your nakedness? When did we see you ill or in prison and come to visit you?’ The ruler will answer them, ‘The truth is, every time you did this for the least of my sisters or brothers, you did it for me.’

“Then the ruler will say to those on the left, ‘Out of my sight, you accursed ones! Into that everlasting fire prepared for the Devil and the fallen angels! I was hungry and you gave me no food; I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink. I was a stranger and you gave me no welcome; naked and you gave me no clothing. I was ill and in prison and you did not come to visit me.’ Then they in turn will ask, ‘When did we see you hungry or thirsty, or homeless or naked, or ill or in prison, and not take care of you?’ The answer will come, ‘The truth is, as often as you neglected to do this to one of the least of these, you neglected to do it to me.’ They will go off to eternal punishment, and the just will go off to eternal life.”

Pastor Donald's Reflections: **“Thy Kingdom Now”**

After reading and studying our text for today, one song came to mind,

“I beg your pardon – I never promised you a rose garden. Along with the sunshine, there's gotta be a little rain sometime.”

I thought of this old Lynn Anderson country song, because, as with much of what Jesus has been telling us here in this 25th chapter of Matthew as we've worked our way through it this month, living life for God and being part of God's kin-dom ain't exactly a bed of roses, and Jesus seems intent on pointing this out as he reminds us that there will be much weeping and gnashing of teeth and quite a bit of banishment if we choose to go the way of the goats and don't heed the lessons learned from a group of oil-carrying bridesmaids,

talent-bestowed servants or sheep being moved to the right and warned not to stray to the left.

Today we really get it right between the eyes, don't we? Jesus isn't pulling any punches or posing any parables with what he's saying today. No, in these last words of chapter 25 he's putting it right out there – a king declaring an edict, if you will – feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked and visit those in prison. Avoid these things and you're avoiding the Christ himself and readying yourself for eternal punishment. Yikey mikey! This rose garden has quite a few thorns in it, doesn't it?

But I have found in my life that guilt and fear really get us nowhere and that far from scaring us into submission, Jesus offers us freedom to be the people that God created us to be. Live up to your potential, sheep, he proclaims. If you let love rule your heart instead of the rapacious greed and selfishness that the goaty world would seem to decree, you will find yourself in the world of the eternal where life rules and death is banished forever.

This doesn't mean to say we should just let ourselves off the hook and think because we go to church and give a few dollars here and there that we're doing the work of Christ.

Remember that last week I posited that, in the parable of the talents, Jesus was leading us to see and understand what pearl of great price and treasure beyond measure the good news of God's kindom is to us and how we should receive it, invest it and treat it.

In the reading for today, Jesus is pointing out even more particularly what the work of the kindom is. If we had been standing by when the rich young ruler asked the ruler of all what the greatest commandment was and Jesus replied, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind..." and, "to Love your neighbor as yourself" perhaps we would have heard the Christ elaborate a bit and let him know just what it meant to love his neighbor as himself. Feed him, clothe him, support him as you support yourself.

Biblical "scholars...support a reading [of this text] that sees all of God's children as deserving of our compassion and generosity," our UCC commentator Kathryn Matthews wrote this week, citing one such scholar, John J. Pilch, who, "explains the difference between lovingkindness, extended to family and friends (and presumably easier), and the more difficult hospitality, which was extended to strangers. Hospitality, so much more important in that culture [Jesus lived in] than our own, is still at the heart of how we practice our faith here in the United Church of Christ: no matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here. Extravagant hospitality: one of our core values."

This is a high call, a high bar. Do we truly extend radical hospitality to everyone? What about those people who bug us? What about those people who disagree with us? What about those people who look, sound and even smell so differently than we do. Even to them?! Yes, my child, even and perhaps, most especially, to them.

"We're reminded of the Beatitudes, earlier in Matthew's Gospel, when we read Thomas G. Long's description of where Christians ought to be found," Kate writes. "For they're

"not the power elite or the moral majority, forcing their will on the nations: they are identified with the weak of the earth and are more likely to be found in hospitals and prisons than in palaces.' That's where this text challenges us, not to define ourselves as 'faithful' simply because we go to church and pray and occasionally make a contribution to a worthy cause or volunteer some of our time to help others.

"The words of Jesus illustrate true religion that transforms our lives, opening our eyes to encounter the sacred in our everyday lives, including the sacred within our most-unexpected brothers and sisters. Isn't it sometimes easier to build beautiful houses of worship, to sing glorious hymns, or even to appreciate the beauty of nature, than it is to see the image of God in one another?"

On this Sunday following Thanksgiving, a day where we give gratitude for our many blessings, do we also thank God for the many ways in which we are challenged to do the work of the Christ? Do we look for opportunities to serve and to give back, being thankful for the many ways in which we are served and given to?

On this Sunday before Advent begins do we look forward to Christ's birth, knowing that there are many in the world who will receive nothing unless we have a hand in giving to them through our love for Christ and for all of God's children?

"Love and compassion are necessities, not luxuries," the Dalai Lama says. "Without them, humanity cannot survive."

Indeed, we are the very hands and feet of Jesus in this world. I was listening to an interview on *Fresh Air* with the Reverend Gregory Boyle, a Jesuit priest right here in Los Angeles who I imagine many of you have heard about. He started Homeboy Industries which has mentored and counseled the more than 12,000 gang members who pass through Homeboy each year to learn job skills, get their gang tattoos removed and attend therapy sessions on everything from alcohol abuse to anger management. (source: NPR's *Fresh Air*)

In the interview, the host, Terry Gross, asks Father Boyle if he measures his success at all by the percentage of people who end up attending church services.

Father Boyle responds with a quite emphatic no, relating an experience he had giving a talk somewhere and explaining that there, "were some church people there and they said, we just can't get gang members to come to our prayer meetings. I went my God. I said look, unless your church is offering concrete help to those gang members, Jesus is not interested in the prayer meeting. Trust me. It has to begin with, how can I help you navigate your life and recognizing that you are carrying more burden than anybody is. It has to be concrete and it has to begin there. If it ends up in the prayer meeting, all the better, but it can't begin there because people aren't, you know, dying for your message. They're just dying because they can't feed themselves. And so begin there. Roll up your sleeves and do the concrete thing, you know."

Sounds a lot like what Jesus was saying to the sheep and the goats, doesn't it?

As we ready ourselves for Christmas and the advent of a New Year, let's do some real soul searching and think about what else we sheep can do here in God's pasture. Keep bringing these great ideas forward that have led us to making lunches each month for Union Station Homeless services, pick fruit for our neighborhood food banks, give toiletries and non-perishable foods for our friends at La Casa and the Seymour Family Center and clothing for the homeless that walk the streets right here in our San Marino neighborhood.

Each time we put a penny in our jar or find a gift for our angel tree we know that we are living as children of the most high and heeding the call of the law of the one who rules with Love.

Let's give *The Last Word* to The Talmud for today, shall we?

"Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief.

Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now.

You are not obligated to complete the work,

but neither are you free to abandon it."

Amen.