
St. Aidan's Sermons

Winnipeg, Manitoba

The Rev. Canon Dr. Brett Cane, November 13, 2011

Remembrance Sunday; 8:30 and 10:00 a.m. Holy Communion

Surprise! Surprise! **Matthew 25:31-46**

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, your love for us is complete and uncalculating; teach us now, by your Holy Spirit, how our love for God, whom we can not see, is expressed through our love for others, whom we can see, that we may live out the life you won for us in service and sacrifice to the glory of your name. Amen.

Introduction

Remembrance Sunday is an opportunity to do many things – not least of which is to remember the horrors of war and to stir us on to work for peace. But chiefly, Remembrance Sunday is an opportunity to give thanks for those who have served and for the many who have given their lives in the distant and recent past in order that others might be delivered from tyranny and oppression. We remember that those who served did so at great cost and it is an opportunity for us to consider how we can serve in the less spectacular but genuinely needy situations where God has placed us today.

This leads us into the Gospel passage and its emphasis on service to those in need. It also ties in with the call to be good servants and stewards of all that God has given us. I have called it, “Surprise! Surprise!” because this is the picture Jesus gives us in the parable of the sheep and the goats at the final great judgement. As people receive their rewards of everlasting life or eternal punishment, the words on everyone’s lips are “When did we do (or not do) this? When did we do (or not do) that?” For some, it is a pleasant surprise. For others, it is a devastating surprise.

Why did Jesus tell this parable in Matthew 25? Was it to give everyone an air of uncertainty about the Last Day and keep us guessing about where we will end up? No; Jesus went to great pains to assure those who believe in him they were precious to God and would not perish, but have everlasting life (John 3:16). Why did he tell it then? It was a warning. It was a warning to all of us who count ourselves part of the people of God that true faith is shown in how we live our lives - more specifically in how we treat those in need. Jesus tells us that we can fool ourselves into thinking we are living life the way God wants us to, that we really are his followers. The acid test, he tells us, is how we treat those in need. How we treat others is to be uncalculating, unspectacular and unexpected.

Uncalculating

Now, maybe some of you are like me - when I hear that the test of my faith is how I treat those in need, I

stop and start to calculate. “How am I doing? How’s my score at helping others?” That’s not quite what Jesus was getting at. The righteous folk - the sheep - in the parable did not sit down and calculate how much they were loving others. Actually, they were quite surprised that they had been. “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?” (Matthew 25:37-29). Isn’t this “salvation by works” - i.e. how many eternal brownie points can I get by helping so-and-so, by doing ministry, by giving to this or that charity?

Not at all. This was, in fact, the attitude of the cursed - the goats. They said, in effect “Gosh, if we had known it was you, Jesus, and that it would count for something, then we would have done it! We didn’t think it was worth helping so-and-so.” Jesus is not asking us to do things to win his approval. He is asking us to examine our hearts to see if there is flowing out from there natural, instinctive and uncalculating loving actions. This is the test of true faith. John tells us that “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). Our actions are a response to the loving action of God within us. Out of that love will flow all kinds of goodness, not because we calculate what we should do, but because we can’t stop ourselves - it is a natural result of receiving God’s love, an uncalculating response.

Unspectacular

How is this love for others shown? What mighty deeds must I do or what vast amounts of money must I give? Here again is part of the surprise in the parable. “I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me” (verses 35-36). Love is shown in the everyday, the simple things of life, the unspectacular. It is shown in welcoming the stranger, cheering the sick, visiting the prisoner, showing genuine hospitality. It is simply a case of meeting the needs of people God brings across our paths or to our attention.

“Oh,” you say, “That sounds easy.” But the parable shows us it is not so easy. We forget that we filter out certain people because they are not important enough, not our background or colour or language, not from our country. How do we treat those who do things for us, even if we pay for them - for example, bus drivers or those who serve us in restaurants or stores? Do treat them as if they were machines or do we, in some small gesture, acknowledge they are made in the image of God and worthy of receiving our attention and thanks? What about folk who beg on the street? In our society today, I do not think that giving in to a request for change is the best response. However, acknowledging that person as human, by a smile or an explanation of why you don’t want to give or offering some helpful alternative like paying for a meal or a cup of coffee is what I think Jesus expects of us in the short term – simple acts of kindness.

In the longer term, he calls us to address the underlying issues of poverty and homelessness – but, again, we do not have to be a William Wilberforce or Mother Theresa – we can start small – like showing-up for a meeting to address housing or walking in a demonstration about missing women. We can help through informing ourselves of the issues, through writing letters and e-mailing our local political representatives. These are ordinary, routine and unspectacular actions. Then, of course, there is helping out at our school to address the underlying issues in the lives of individuals. In all of this, God is not asking us to solve the entire poverty or homeless problem by ourselves, simply to do our part.

This is how we are to show our love, in the simple, unspectacular ways that are offered to us day by day.

Unexpected

Then comes the unexpected, the biggest surprise of all. Jesus tells the sheep and goats that their attitudes

and actions were all done or not done to *him*. “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (verse 40). What does this mean? Is there some mystical identification of Jesus with the needy? Is it the same as saying God is everywhere and in everyone? No. It is saying that the way we express our love for God is through ministering to others. The apostle John writes, “Anyone who does not love his brother or sister whom he has seen cannot love God, whom he has not seen...Whoever loves God must also love his brother or sister.” (1 John 4:20-21). A contemporary writer has put it this way:

“You love Jesus as much as the person you love the least.”

That really cuts me to the heart. I may say all I want about how much I love God, but if I treat someone near me like dirt, Jesus is saying that that is how I treat God. This is a person made in God’s image, for whom Christ died. If I do not love that person whom I can see, how can I say I love God whom I cannot see?

William Barclay records a story about Martin of Tours.

He was a Roman soldier and a Christian. One cold winter day, as he was entering a city, a beggar stopped and asked for alms. Martin had no money; but the beggar was blue and shivering with cold, and Martin gave him what he had. He took off his soldier’s coat, worn and frayed as it was; he cut it in two and gave half of it to the beggar man. That night he had a dream. In it he saw the heavenly places and the angels and Jesus in the midst of them; and Jesus was wearing half of a Roman soldier’s cloak. One of the angels said to him, “Master, why are you wearing that battered old cloak? Who gave it to you?” And Jesus answered softly, “My servant Martin gave it to me.”¹

How we treat others is how we treat Jesus. Jesus is the unexpected recipient of our love.

Barclay summarizes, “When we learn the generosity which without calculation helps (men) folk in the simplest things, we too will know the joy of helping Jesus Christ himself.”² Uncalculating, unspectacular, unexpected.

Stewardship

What does all this have to do with stewardship? A great deal. Stewardship is more than how we give money to God; it’s how we give of all that God has given us - our time, our abilities, our resources. As we consider what our financial commitment to St. Aidan’s is to be for 2012 when we come next week to present our pledge cards, they represent the whole of our lives being offered to God.

How does God call us to exercise the stewardship of our time, our talents, as well as our treasure? Like the sheep - we give without calculation, naturally, with generosity flowing from a loving heart, without trying to figure “What is the least I can give and still be in God’s good books?” We give unspectacularly with what God has given us – in what may seem routine or ordinary ways: of time - in cleaning the kitchen or volunteering at the school; of talent - in fixing electrical systems or leading Bible studies; of treasure - in our regular tithes as we set aside money for God’s work in our parish or wider afield.

Finally, we are really giving to God - not to St. Aidan’s, not to the wider Church - but to Jesus Christ himself. He is, to us, the unexpected benefactor of our stewardship.

In all of this, our stewardship is a natural, loving response to God’s love and giving to us. It is so natural, that when we realize what we have done, it will be a complete surprise!

¹ William Barclay, “Daily Study Bible,” The Gospel of Matthew, Vol. 2. (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1975), pg. 326.

² Ibid..