

Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
February 2 & 3, 2013
Rich Phenow
The Essential Teachings of Jesus: The Least of These
Matthew 25

We have been working our way through a series called *The Essential Teachings of Jesus, Words to Live By*. Two weeks ago we heard from a man, a theologian, a scholar, a teacher, Scot McKnight. He taught us the Jesus Creed, Jesus' own words about what it means to be spiritually formed in order to be forever changed. The Jesus Creed challenges us to be mindful of loving God with everything we have and loving our neighbors as ourselves. McKnight challenged us to recite it every day, multiple times a day, for at least thirty days and told us if we did this, our hearts would change. We would see things and hear things and be engaged in life in such a way that it would forever change us.

Last week we passed out a card with the Jesus Creed on it. We invite you to grab one as you leave today. We asked you to tape it to your bathroom mirror or put it by your bedside and try to read this prayer as often as you can. I've been trying to do that and I hope that you have as well. To help me do that today and to help you stay caught up, we are going to say the Jesus Creed together. It will come up on our screens now. Repeat along with me:

²⁹ ... 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.

³⁰ Love the Lord your God with all your heart
and with all your soul and with all your mind
and with all your strength.'

³¹ The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'

There is no commandment greater than these." [Mark 12:29:31]

This is a teaching that shapes us, transforms us. It is an essential teaching, foundational, and it ties into the essential teaching we'll hear in our Gospel account this morning. Hear the Word of God as it comes to us in Matthew 25.

(Narrator:) ³¹ "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. ³⁴ "Then the King will say to those on his right,

(Righteous Sheep:) 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. ³⁵ For 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, ³⁶ 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.'

(Narrator:) ³⁷ “Then the righteous will answer him,

(Righteous Sheep:) ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

(Narrator:) ⁴⁰ “The King will reply,

(Jesus:) ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’

(Narrator:) ⁴¹ “Then he will say to those on his left,

(Jesus:) ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’

(Narrator:) ⁴⁴ “They also will answer,

(Goats:) ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’

(Narrator:) ⁴⁵ “He will reply,

(Jesus:) ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’

(Narrator:) ⁴⁶ “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

This is the Word of the Lord.

(Congregation:) Thanks be to God.

Excuse me. This *is* the Word of the Lord!

(Congregation:) Thanks *be* to God!

If we are going to sing of St. Francis, then we are going to respond to the Scripture the *right* way. A harsh word this morning. A tough word. A word about judgment with a question for us. And the question is, are we goats or are we sheep? Jesus used parables to communicate the essential truths and teachings that God desires us to live by. The essential teaching in this parable is how we are called to live until Jesus returns. In the words of British theologian James Barclay:

This is one of the most vivid parables Jesus ever spoke, and the lesson is crystal clear—that God will judge us in accordance with our reaction to human need. His judgment does

not depend on the knowledge we have amassed, or the fame we have acquired, or the fortune we have gained, but on the help we have given.

One day, you and I will be called to account for how we have lived our lives on this earth. And the question will be, are we sheep or are we goats? Now I think this thought can ruffle our Protestant feathers because we are taught that we are saved by grace through faith alone. We are saved by the mercy and the grace of Jesus and what He did for us by taking our sins upon Himself on the cross. And it is through faith in Jesus that we are saved, but we are changed people when we genuinely accept Christ. There is a spiritual rebirth. We are given a new nature, and God calls us to nurture that Christ-like nature through obedience to Jesus' teachings. It is God's grace that saves us but God's grace does not cancel our duty to obey Him.

Now the goats in this passage, if they had faith, they never let it move from their heads to their hearts. Theirs would have been an intellectual belief in Jesus without genuinely giving their hearts to the life-changing experience of the grace and mercy of Christ. There were no actions displayed that pointed to an inward change that true faith brings to our lives. As we wait for the return of Christ, as we live out our lives on this earth, we are called to a living faith, a faith that tries through obedience with the help and the gift of the Holy Spirit to follow Christ's example and teachings. We are saved by grace through faith, but we are called to a living faith. Not a dead faith but a living faith. Follow with me what James tells us in the second chapter of his letter.

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if people claim to have faith but have no deeds? Can such faith save them? ¹⁵ Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶ If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷ In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

Dead faith. Living faith. Goats and sheep. We are not called to a dead faith but a living faith, a living faith that transforms how we act and behave. True faith always results in a changed life and in good deeds. But good deeds of loving service are not a substitute for faith, rather they are a witness to our faith. Our actions show that our commitment to God is real, that our spiritual rebirth is real. Our new nature, the nature of Jesus, will increasingly express itself in our lives as we try to live obediently to His teachings. It is God's grace that saves us, but it's our grateful response to that love and grace we've been given that causes us to love God back and act differently.

So what is the essential teaching that Jesus wants us to follow in this parable? It is to help those in need. It is to see the need of our neighbors and to respond in action, to do as the Jesus Creed reminds us: love our neighbor. Jesus tells us this important truth: when we love our neighbor, we are loving God with our hearts and our souls and our minds and our strength. It seems so simple, doesn't it? But why is it so hard for us? Why do we hesitate? What holds us back from living out God's command to help those in need, to love our neighbor as ourselves?

I want to explore that just briefly with you. I think there are obstacles and barriers that keep us from seeing the needs of our neighbors. I am going to name a few that seem evident to me. One of them is our busyness. I think we suffer from a disease called hurriedness. We are busy going nowhere fast and spending little time slowing ourselves down. Many of us measure our worth

and significance by how busy we are. "I am more important than you because I am busier than you". The fast pace of life wears us out. It distracts us from being near and in touch with those in need all around us. Why? Because we are just running right by them in our busyness.

For some of us it is being consumed by ourselves in our own world and its challenges. We become myopic, self-absorbed, focused on our own needs. It could be a need for security or success or safety, but it is the things and stuff of our culture that give us a temporary feeling of gratification. John [Pastor John Crosby] talked about that last week. He talked about the things we hold onto that have a grip on us. We need to open our hands and let go of the fears, let go of the burdens. We need to let go of those things that grip us and invite God to take them from us, to release us from our aloneness, from our own physical and emotional pains, from the scars and woes that imprison us, the barrier of busyness, the barrier of our myopic focus on ourselves.

Another barrier could be complacency or stagnation or laziness that result in our being immobilized. It's realizing that we have been waiting for life to begin somewhere off in the future. "Life will change when the kids are gone and the nest is empty. Then we'll spend more time doing things for others." We spend more time waiting and wishing for the right time, the right opportunity, and missing all that God has in store in this moment and season of our lives. Many of us live life waiting for that season to come and then we die. It could be the thought that we have so little to offer. "What could I give? I have nothing for my neighbor." Those are obstacles, but there are many more.

Let me talk to you simply about how we do it. How do we respond to God's grace and forgiveness and love for us? We simply take it in, receive it, and realize that it is not about our worthiness or our sense of worthlessness. It is not about how we see ourselves that is so important. It's about how God sees us. We start by acting, not out of fear of God's judgment or our ability to assess our goatliness or sheepliness but with a heart of gratitude for how Jesus has transformed our lives. He has promised us the power of the Holy Spirit so that we can have a compassion for others and can get beyond our feeling of leastness to see the hurting and the hungry and the forgotten and the alone and the abandoned all around us. Suddenly we see them all through God's eyes, the grieving parent who has lost a child, the widow, those who are homebound and need a visit.

Let me give you just a quick little training session, a quick little training session in how we do this. I was trained as a child that if I caught on fire, I should stop, drop, and roll. Well, I'm not talking about putting out a fire this morning. I'm talking about starting a fire. I want you to do this three-step plan of mine.

1.) I want you to stop, stop long enough to look. Lift your head up and your eyes. I want you to pray the Jesus Creed every day so you begin to develop a vision for the people God desires us to see, people in need all around us, living in our homes and neighborhoods, our offices and schools, as well as those on street corners.

2.) Stop and lift your head and look around. Then stop again. Stop talking and push away the loud noises that distract us, the voices that beat us up, and train your ears to hear the needs of those around us. When we stop to listen, suddenly we hear sounds and words that we've never heard before. We hear the sadness, we hear the pain, even the joy, all around us and we are invited into it. So stop being busy.

3.) Stop to look, stop to listen, and start. Start to train your feet and your hands to act, to move, to do something. Not something huge and humongous but small, tangible acts of love. If we just move toward the need and don't measure the act by how big our abilities are to meet the needs, if we stop to look, to listen, then our hearts start beating. We get engaged and we move to make a difference and love our neighbor

It's not complicated. It is not a seven-step thing. It's about stopping, and stopping, and starting. As Jesus Creed people, we are not given an option. We have to see compassion as our responsibility, our brand. As Jesus Creed people, we are compelled to show up, come alongside of, be *with* and *for* those in need, not with all the right words but with the right heart, trusting the Holy Spirit for the right actions and deeds to meet the need.

Let me just give you two quick examples. This past summer I had the privilege of going to Africa, to Zambia, to meet our partners there. I was overwhelmed by these people who have virtually nothing. These people are constantly meeting the needs of others. They are generous, joy-filled people who respond to God's grace with thanksgiving and give freely of the little they have. These people live by faith. These people are sheep-bringers and sheep-bearers.

Let me give you another example. There is a ministry here called Tapestry. Van [Van Chounlamountry], our middle school youth minister, and about 15 student impact leaders who volunteer, work with special needs kids. Tuesday evening I was in the kitchen here at the church, and I was overcome by this group of about 10 or 12 of our students, our children. In the kitchen were these kids we call special needs kids but, really, they don't have special needs. We have special needs for them. These kids came together to make Valentine treats, Rice Krispie bars and monster cookies, for our seniors. These are special needs kids who were stopping and starting to make a difference. They were so full of joy and excitement, so fully engaged and involved in doing something for others, in meeting needs. Wow! What a moment! I was asked to pray, and I held hands with them in a circle. I was so overwhelmed, my eyes filled with tears as I choked out a prayer. I had witnessed a scene in heaven, of simple, real grace lived out in hearts moved to action.

This weekend is a special weekend for us. Lay Care Weekend when we install some people we have trained to be sheep in the church. Quickly in the next few minutes I'm going to interview a guy named Dan Rockers. Dan is simply a rock star to me. He really is. Dan is involved in a ministry in our church, and I appreciate this guy a lot. I wanted you to get to meet him and just hear a little bit about his story. Dan, tell us a little about you. Give us some of your background.

(Dan Rockers:) Well, first, I want to say, I'm very humbled to be here. Looking at the bulletin and seeing the number of people involved, I'm just one of many. I guess that there is a big heart out there in this church. I'm from Austin, Minnesota. I grew up down there in southern Minnesota where we have a lot of big, Catholic, German families. I'm the ninth of 10 kids. I have 99 first cousins. My wife Betty is from the Chicago area, and she has zero cousins. We have two boys. Ian is 21 and over at Eau Claire in his third year there, trying to pray for those Vikings. He is up against the wall with all those Wisconsin people. Nolan is 18 and at St. Louis Park High School, where we live.

(Rich Phenow:) Dan was sitting in the crowd, like you, a couple of years ago. He heard about the Lay Care Ministry and something stirred inside of him. He went through the training, and

now he is involved in a very impactful way. I just you to hear a little bit about what Dan is doing.

(Dan:) It was just a year ago that I went through the training, so it's still pretty new for me. It was a service just like this and many others here at this church when my heart was stirred. It really was the Holy Spirit coming through. Sitting in the crowd and hearing the words of action, and also in a small group that I had joined, the theme of being the hands and feet of Christ was becoming stronger and stronger for me. That theme is really our command. It was that stirring along with my wife urging me to do it, saying, "That's a good fit for you." The time was right with the kids getting older, so I took the leap. But it wasn't a big leap at all because it was such a welcoming group of people and leadership, the team for congregational care that was up here during the reading of the names. So it wasn't a big leap at all for me.

(Rich:) Now, it is important for you to know that this is not an infomercial for Lay Care Ministries. This is really a story about a guy who heard the Word and was moved. He was moved to love God and to love others. So he comes into this ministry and gets trained, gets involved in this grief ministry. He was sitting around a table with a number of folks who were grieving, and I sat in there this fall and spoke about grief. Then I watched Dan facilitate. He was masterful. He has a Ph.D. in sheepology. He engaged people and invited them to share their stories. This guy was so good, engaging and listening and tying in themes. It was a holy moment for me. This is a common guy doing uncommon acts of love. Let's just end with this. Dan, how are you being transformed and shaped? What is happening to you in the process?

(Dan:) I think the impact for me has been how little I have. It's really the Holy Spirit that shows up. These grieving folks, we don't have answers. We don't necessarily have the right words, but it's been amazing in each of the monthly grief meetings how the Spirit moves each time in a different way for each person who is there. Whether it is somebody who has lost a wife and they've been together for 60 years, or somebody who lost a child just two weeks ago. It's not an easy thing to do, but it's easy to get out of the way and let the Holy Spirit come through us and just really listen. I don't have to do anything but just show up there. It's very humbling, and it's an honor to be with those folks. It takes belief for them to come to the meeting, really.

(Rich:) To quote another Catholic theologian, St. Francis, he says, it's in giving that we receive. And Jesus told us today that when we give to others, we are loving Him. Praise God, Dan, for your love of God and your love for others. Let's hear it for Dan.

(Applause.)

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.