

Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
February 6 & 7, 2016
Debbie Manning
Imagine Church: Tangible Care & Hospitality | Matthew 25:35-40

Well hi everyone! I'm Debbie Manning and I'm part of the Congregational Care team. I feel a little bit like I should be saying *I'm baaaaccckk*, because it was just about six weeks ago that I stood up here and I told you guys about how crazy it was at my house during preach week. Right about now you're probably thinking, oh, *I bet her husband had a few Jamison Gingers under his belt this week*, but he hasn't because he was in Chicago on business. Lucky him! But the other reason that we didn't have preach week is because I got myself a Fit Bit for Christmas. Who can have preach week when you have a Fit Bit, because it changes everything? You have to have about ten thousand steps every day for what they say is a healthy lifestyle. First day I had this Fit Bit on I came home from work, Steve and I had dinner, he sat down on the couch and he hears this noise behind him. He looks back and I'm doing this (Debbie is sliding back and forth). And he says, "What in the world are you doing?" "I have two thousand steps left and I am not going to bed until I get them in." And that has been the story of our life since I got my Fit Bit.

But I think truly, it's a good thing to care for ourselves because I think we can have the fuller life that God calls us to. And when my family really gets into the fitness mode, we start doing these workout DVDs—Insanity, and T25—and anyone who's done those, you're familiar with Shawn T. He's the fitness instructor. He's big, he's buff, he's mean, and at the end of one of his videos he stands up all sweaty, just did the workout and he goes, "Sometimes I wonder *why do I do the things that I do?*" And then he answers himself and he says, "Because I want to look good." Well, to tell you the truth, I'm always a little irritated by that because that's not why we take care of ourselves. It's not to look good; it's to *be* good. It's to have the full life. I think about it in terms so that I can continue to do the things that I feel like God is calling me to do. And I do think it's a little bit of what the capital campaign is about.

There have been a lot of good conversations and questions—we need to do that, this is a big deal—but I'll tell you, when it comes to caring for our church, renovating and updating, for me it's not at all about looking good, it's about being the best we can be. It's about being the place, the space, and the context we live, so that we can do what we do, only bigger and better, so that we can invite all sorts of people into this life-changing relationship with Jesus that we all experience and that we are all walking.

So, John kicked-off the capital campaign a few weeks ago and out of the campaign we're talking about this idea: Imagine Church. Imagine what the Church can be. We solidified our values as we looked at that and last week John spoke about living in the tension, this value that we hold as a community. Today I get to talk about tangible care and hospitality and how that kind of love changes lives.

We're going to be in the book of Matthew this morning. Matthew, as a disciple of Jesus, gave a compelling witness and testimony to Jesus of Nazareth, the long awaited Messiah, who came and changed everything. What I love about the book of Matthew is he reminds us that our identity in Christ, along with this call to service, is what unifies us as one people, and that this unity in service defies any past barriers of race, or religion, or culture. So keep that in mind as we dig into Matthew's gospel. Here Jesus is talking to His disciples:

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, '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.' ³⁷ "Then the righteous will answer, '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?' ⁴⁰ The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for Me.' [Matthew 25:31-40]

Jesus is telling the disciples a story of the Son of Man coming in His glory, separating people into two groups: sheep and goats. Now, this audience would have understood that well because in those days, and it continues in the Middle East, the sheep and the goats graze together and they'd be separated at different times—separated for sheering and separated at nighttime as the goats couldn't withstand the cold, This audience would understand the separating of the goats and the sheep, but Jesus says He was separating people. He will separate people based on how they treated the hungry, and the thirsty, the stranger, the sick, and the lonely.

Now, sometimes this passage is used to talk about, even argue about, who is going to heaven and who is going to hell. I think when we use that passage for this we're missing Jesus' point, because Jesus was saying this to us: He's going to know who His true

followers are by those who acted out of compassion, those who cared for the suffering and the poor. So the righteous, those that are aligned with God, will inherit the kingdom, not because of acts of compassion, but because of their transformed hearts, their changed lives, evidenced by their compassion and their care for other people, and in particular, the “least of these”.

So, I think to get stuck on the “who” isn’t as important as the “why”. Why are some invited to eternal joy and others condemned? And it’s pretty simple: whether they went to the right or to the left was determined by whether or not they recognized Jesus. And it’s true for us, right? We see Jesus every time we open the Bible. We see Jesus, the Savior and Redeemer, every time we participate in the holy sacrament of baptism or we gather together and we share in Communion. We see Jesus when we gather for prayer and we bring our troubles to God. We see Jesus when we worship together. We see Jesus. And when the Lay Care Ministers were installed, we saw Jesus. But Jesus goes beyond this. He asks whether we have seen Him in the face of the hungry and the thirsty, the sick, the stranger, those in prison. What Jesus is looking at is our heart and our actions of compassion and love, or lack of it, that we have shown for these, the least, His brothers and sisters.

It seems to me that the real message in this parable that Jesus is telling us is that somehow Christ is mysteriously present to us in those that we serve and those that need us, and we are called to love and care for others just as God has been there to love and care for us through Jesus.

Earlier this week, Jim Wallace was in town. I don’t know if anyone heard him at the Westminster Forum at noon last Thursday. Jim is a Christian, a theologian, he’s the Chief Editor of Sojourner’s Magazine, and he’s written books. He’s recently written a book on the racial divide and white privilege. The day before he spoke, a group of us—local pastors—gathered at Mill City Church in Northeast, and we got to hear from him and have a conversation with him. It was awesome, but one of the things Jim talked about that really stuck with me all week was the idea of Imago Dei: the image of God. That means we recognize that every human being carries the image of God—no exception. This is a doctrine of our faith.

So God created humankind in His image, in the image of God He created them; male and female He created them. [Genesis 1:27]

That means that God exists in all human beings: black and white, rich and poor, gay and straight, conservative and liberal, victims and perpetrators, citizens and undocumented, believers and unbelievers. And the implication of this doctrine for us is huge because it means that if, as humans, we love God, then humans must love other humans that God has created because each human being is an expression of God. That’s not where Jesus stops in this passage. Jesus tells us that in the least and the lost

and the forgotten and the broken, we see The Divine. And isn't it true that it's in our fragile state, in our flawed and broken places, that we most often see God? Because Jesus never stops pointing to The Divine image and the significance of the people that we often walk by, the people who are the easiest to ignore and the most likely to be forgotten. Who is that for you? Because I know that I have a couple of those people. The power of this passage is Jesus' insistence that The Divine is all around us, especially where we are least likely to look.

Now, the second part of this parable is that there's a larger story that Jesus is referring to, one that's rooted in this first century Jewish audience's conviction that God calls them to be partners in caring for the world. They held that tight and they held that to be true—God calling us to partner with Him, to care for the world, and to do something good with it. And the question driving the story is *what are you doing with what you've been given?* I think this means that should be the question driving us. Are we growing in the awareness of The Divine all around us? In the conversations, and the people, and the encounters that we have? Are we growing in the awareness of how important it is to be present, to be compassionate, to be welcoming to those we meet in the day-to-day? Not just in the big ways, but in the small ways. That's when we see The Divine.

I was reminded of that this past week. Jody was out of town and she does such a wonderful job loving and caring for our seniors, and I got a chance to visit someone that she visits. His name is George. He's elderly and bedridden, and he's in the last season of his life. I went to visit him, and I got to sit at the side of his bed, and hear the stories of the love of his life, his wife whom he lost a few years ago. I got to hear the stories of his father who was a doctor and took a sled to visit his patients, his stories of being a doctor himself, and stories of his faith and his life. And in that moment I realized I was seeing The Divine and I was all filled up. I was all filled up, so it's in those things in the day-to-day.

But overarching the text that we're looking at, we have to remember this Jesus that we love and follow, and that He was sensitive to suffering. In his book *Who Is This Man?* John Ortberg refers to Jesus as being "cranky and compassionate" and he says that cranky and compassionate came from Jesus' outrageous love for anybody and everybody. His crankiness came from His pain when people were overlooked and undervalued. In all of the stories about Jesus' compassion, and there are many of them, we are never ever told that Jesus was compassionate because somebody deserved it. Jesus was compassionate because people *needed* it.

This is what Ortberg has to say: "Compassion became the 'brand' of this new religious movement, not because it attracted such wonderful people, but because they understood from their founder it was not an optional piece of equipment." I love that. Jesus created a whole new vision of a human being, but the best thing was that people

actually took Jesus at His word. After Jesus died, people remembered His words, remembered His acts of compassion and care, and they became a church that cared for the hurting and the suffering, and the outside world noticed. They noticed something different.

There's a sociologist that studied this—his name is Rodney Stark. He argues that one of the primary reasons for the spread of the Jesus movement was the way His followers responded to sick and hurting people. Imagine the Church if we did that. At the end of the day, Jesus' mission is our mission. Let's face it, we worship a God who is entangled in the suffering of the world; He's entangled in our suffering, He's entangled in other people's suffering, and in fact, we worship a God that chooses not to untangle all the knots, and all the pain, and all the problems. He invites us into that, to partner with Him, to put our love with His love, and to care for people. For us that means reaching out to our sick friends, bringing a meal to someone grieving, inviting a stranger into our church home. It's powerful when we do that. We spread the mission of Christ when we do that.

We don't have to look too far to find the people whom Jesus called "the least". And that's because it's me, and you, and our neighbor. I said earlier that I think one of the things we do well here is care. I think part of the reason for the care that goes on in these hallways, and in this room, and outside these doors, is the foundation of Lay Care Ministries; a foundation of ministries that I think has seeped into the fabric of who we are, and it's so cool. You know, all we do is ask people who have a compassionate heart to come forward, and we help do some training and equipping . . . people go out and love the sick, visit people in the hospital, walk alongside people in pain and hardship, run care groups, pray with people, visit our seniors, it's pretty amazing! I would love for you guys to just get a glimpse of what we do in Lay Care Ministries, so take a look.

[Tangible Care & Hospitality Video] <https://vimeo.com/154601201>

I think our challenge is seeing the image of God in others, in particular, those that are hurting, the suffering, the least as Christ said. I think our challenge is to step outside of ourselves, to partner with God and care for one another. Sometimes it will be hard and uncomfortable and a stretch, but it changes everything. That's how we live out the Gospel here and now, and for me, that's what it means to Imagine Church. Tangible Care and hospitality . . . it is a love, Jesus' love that changes lives. Please pray with me.

Holy God we humbly come before You as Yours. We are so grateful, God, that we can see You all around us, in the faces of the people we meet with and the conversations we have, and all sorts of encounters. And God, we pray with Your help that we can be the kind of people that love one another, love the least of

these, with the love and the compassion that you have had for us. All this in Your holy and precious name, Amen.

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.