

Vision

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

October 25, 2020

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Text

Matthew 25: 35-40

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, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” ³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” ⁴⁰And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

Prayer

Sermon

Last week I talked about the Christian call to agape-love - other-focused, self-giving love - and the way that agape love aims us toward the kingdom of God, which we would be building.

“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God...God is love.” (1 John 4)

We have seen this kind of agape love embodied in Jesus, and in today’s passage, Jesus tells us more about what that agape love looks like in action.

“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, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”

So today, let’s think about what the kingdom we might build with agape love looks like, feels like. Let’s imagine that state of being.

I actually want you to close your eyes and think about this: what would it be like for the hungry to be fed? What would it be like for everyone searching for home to be welcomed? Perhaps remember a time when you were lonely, tired, felt imprisoned and were visited? Can you translate that to what the world might be like, can you paint yourself a picture?

I want to talk about holy imagination and why it is crucial to a faith community like ours.

You know it's stewardship season, and I think the spiritual practice of holy imagination is a big reason for faithful giving.

We give because we're thankful to God for the blessings of our lives, yes - we'll talk about that next week.

And we give because we're invited to agape love.

But we also give because we can imagine what our gifts, when given together, when gathered corporately, become part of a different, beautiful, transformed world.

It can be tricky to imagine the world transformed, renewed, blessed, aligned with God's principles and priorities. Right now, the world seems like a mess, and the future is troubled.

It turns out that Matthew 25 was written to a community in a troubled time, too, and Jesus's pointed vision of the last judgment asked this community how they would live in the midst of challenge.

In these present troubled days I have been drawn back again and again to a framework from the writings of Joanna Macy and Chris Redstone. Now, for context, they're Buddhist and the book I'm quoting, *Active Hope*, was written to give spiritual counsel to climate activists. But their framing works for any moment of crisis. They talk about the power of vision, and the power of the story we tell of the present and future.

They describe three great stories that people tell:

The first is *Business as Usual*. Everything's fine and there's no reason to change the way we live.

The second story is the *Great Unraveling*. It's the story of the collapse of ecological and social systems.

You might be envisioning either of these stories.

But Joanna Macy suggests that a third and radically different story should be our story. “The third story is held and embodied by those who know the first story is leading us to catastrophe and who refuse to let the second story have the last word. Involving the emergence of new and creative human responses...a life-sustaining society committed to the healing and recovery of our world. We call this story the Great Turning. The central plot is finding and offering our gift of active hope.” (Active Hope, p. 5) And she goes on to say that it really and truly matters which story we live into, which story our lives express. To have the future we yearn for, we need to live into that story as we write it. I was talking about this idea with a friend yesterday and she reminded me of the phrase attributed to Gandhi, “be the change you wish to see in the world.”

I can't help but think Jesus was calling his followers to live into this kind of Active Hope. Imagine, he said, what it will be like if in spite of challenges, you follow my teachings. When you are called to give account, the story you tell will be one of generosity, but not just that - the story you tell will be one of a world made better.

Jesus's ministry illustrated a vision of a world made better. He taught abundance over scarcity, generosity over shrinking inward, and he practiced active hope.

As we look at our present, and especially as we look past the pandemic, we have the chance to write and live a hopeful story. Hebrew Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann spends a lot of time talking about the Exodus of the Hebrew people from slavery. He says the Exodus did not start with the Red Sea crossing. Liberation happened when Moses went up the mountain and saw an alternate vision of reality, an alternate possibility from the people's enslavement. As we look to our future, I think God is offering the same kind of invitation: to envision a liberated and transformed world, and write that story.

Is one local congregation going to transform the world? We can change our pocket of the world. Let me tell you, even in a pandemic you have fed the hungry, you have welcomed the stranger, you have prayed for the prisoner and you have quenched spiritual thirst. And when we join others, the world can turn toward agape love. As we look into 2021 we want to continue to write and live into that story.

“Behold the vision: the beautiful dream of justice and joy is held up in the two hands of Jesus.” (Nancy Rockwell)

“If we are willing to suspend our expectations and live into the surprising reality of the God we know in Christ, then we are invited to meet God not in some distant eternal life or other-worldly reality but here and now, in the concrete and real need of our neighbors, just as they are invited to meet and be blessed by God as they tend to our needs as well. The God we know in Jesus is revealed, that is, not in power but in vulnerability, not in might but brokenness, and not in judgment but in mercy.” David Lose, <http://www.davidlose.net/2014/11/christ-the-king-a/>)

So, as the poet Rumi suggests, “Close both eyes and see with the other eye.”
Close your eyes. See the kingdom. See hungry people fed, literally, and spiritually. See the prisoner visited and the oppressed liberated and folks without warm clothes with their needs met. See those thirsty for dignity, love, kindness given glasses of living water. See everyone welcomed, affirmed, and blessed.

See each other in that story.

See Pilgrim Church in that story.
Now open your eyes, and write that story. Amen.