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A Heart for the Least of These
Matthew 25:31-46

³¹ “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³ and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴ Then the king will say to those at his right hand, **‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵ for 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, ³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’** ³⁷ Then 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? ³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ ⁴⁰ And 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,^[a] you did it to me.’** ⁴¹ Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴² for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ ⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ ⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ ⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

One of the most inspiring Christian activist and authors is a young man named Shane Claiborne. He started a monastic-type community of Christians called The Simple Way in Philadelphia. He also went to ***minister alongside Mother Teresa*** in ***CALCUTTA***.

He talks about being in Calcutta—
 and how Mother Teresa admired his commitment to ministry,
 and coming all the way across the globe,
 but she also frequently repeated something interesting to him:
“Calcuttas are everywhere....Find your Calcutta.”

Krin Van Tatenhove and Rob Mueller, *Neighborhood Church: Transforming Your Congregation Into a Powerhouse for Mission*, WJK: Louisville, 2019, pg. 6.

I love that.
 Isn't that powerful? And so true?

There ARE Calcuttas everywhere!

The question is, do we see them?

Do we respond to people and places in need, right here?
 Because the least of these are all around us,
 if we have the eyes to see, and the hearts to respond!

This was so true of Mother Teresa's own work,
 She didn't go out to help the poor,
she went out and lived among them, and learned from them,
she befriended them, and built relationships with them,
 and slowly started meeting their basic needs,
 while respecting their dignity every step of the way.
 She didn't indulge in what people today call 'toxic charity'—
 doing for others what they can do for themselves.
 She offered what people needed, alongside them, with them—not just for them.

This idea that the least of these are everywhere,
 Might be the ***first key to finding our mission as individuals, and as a church!***
 We have to ***open our eyes*** to the needs all around us.

I wonder, how often do you really notice, and really interact,
 with the people at the grocery store? As you are getting fuel for your car?
 Do you talk with people in the doctor's office?
 What about when you go and visit friends or family?
 Or strangers you meet in elevators?
 Are there people you encounter who seem to be in need,
 as you go about your daily or weekly routine?

If we are paying attention,
 we all have ***dozens of opportunities to be servants and ministers*** in this world.
 We can do the ***smallest acts*** of kindness,
 carrying groceries, holding the elevator,
 picking up something dropped, smiling at a crying baby.
 And we can do those things God lays upon our heart that are ***big, and sacrificial***.
 Giving time, money, effort—something that really costs us something.

Last week I mentioned Adam Hamilton's idea that we look at our hand and those
 fingers as a reminder to do ***5 acts of kindness***—a week!
 What a simple way to love and serve and minister in the name of Jesus.
 What if we looked at our hand and asked God to show us
5 of the least of these this week, and help us serve them?

In Matthew 20:26-28 Jesus said:

²⁶ *It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant,* ²⁷ *and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your servant;* ²⁸ *just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.*”

Another key to finding our mission in this world is to have ***TWO CONVERSIONS a conversion of the mind, and the heart.***

The first conversion, ***of the MIND***, is a very important one.
 There's a book we've been reading called---*The Neighborhood Church: Transforming Your Church Into a Powerhouse for Mission*.
 And in that book, they talk about changing our mindset—
 from one of ***scarcity to abundance***.

Krin Van Tatenhove and Rob Mueller, *Neighborhood Church: Transforming Your Congregation Into a Powerhouse for Mission*, WJK: Louisville, 2019, pg. 10.

What does that mean?

Well—the truth is, for Christians, there is no scarcity. Scarcity is a myth.

The truth is that we ***always have God's abundance***.

As children of God,
 we have inherited the abundance of God,
 and we are tapped into an ***infinite supply of God's power and provision!***

But how often do we think that way?
Not very often, right?

All too often *our default is to think in terms of scarcity*—
we think that we don't have enough to help others,
because we feel like we barely have enough for ourselves.
We think that God can't provide what we need,
because we are small in numbers, or small in finances, or small in space.
We forget that God is in the business of making the impossible possible!

So, how do we change our mindset from scarcity to abundance?
The number one thing we need is, **GRATITUDE!**
We have to *count our blessings!*
We have to take time and look at all that God has given us!

Let's stop and do that right now—*what are some of your blessings?....*
What are some of the blessings of this *church community?....*

Usually during times of stress,
we all tend to pull inside ourselves, and think about what we are *lacking*.
But what if we did what Paul encourages in Philippians 4:4-8—
and thought about all the blessings and the goodness in our lives?

Paul says there that we are to *rejoice* always,
to *not worry*, but give it all to God in *prayer*,
and then the *peace of Christ* will guard our hearts and minds.
Then he says this about *gratitude and our heart's focus*:

⁸ *Finally, beloved,^[e] whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just,
whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any
excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about^[f] these things.*

This is so important.
We are called, as children of God, to be full of **GRATITUDE**—
and share that *positive attitude, and optimism* with everyone around us!

Now, I realize that some people are 'glass half-empty' realists,
but as Christians we are called to a *new attitude*—
one of *encouragement, gratitude, and optimism!*

This is not being a silly ‘Pollyanna’,
 this is actually about being a *realist*—
Because the REALITY is that God has and will
 give us more than we could ever ask or imagine.

In fact, Paul says that much in **Ephesians 3:18-21:**

¹⁸ *I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth,* ¹⁹ *and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.*

²⁰ *Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to **accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine,*** ²¹ *to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*

The truth is, WE REAP WHAT WE SOW.

If we sow thoughts that are *negative*, that’s what we end up with.

If we sow thoughts of *encouragement and gratitude and blessing*,

We see and experience even more encouragement and blessings!

In Matthew 9:36 it says this:

*When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷ Then he said to his disciples, “**The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few;** ³⁸ therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”*

We are being asked to go out into the fields of this world,
 as laborers for the harvest.

The harvest is plentiful, ***Jesus just needs us to get out there!***

One way the Neighborhood Church books talks about this mindset of abundance within the church is by looking at our ‘assets’ as First Presbyterian of Owasso.

What are those assets?

Well, think of things like

a nice well-kept building with some empty space during the week,

or a huge beautiful green lawn,

or people who love to serve,

people who want to include others and welcome everyone.

These are just a few of our assets!

In the book they encourage ***ABCD—Asset-Based Community Development.***

In other words, looking at what gifts and talents and blessings you have---
in order to meet the needs of your community!

This is very similar to that beautiful saying of Presbyterian Pastor and author **Frederick Beuchner**, who said that we find our calling in this world by looking to see where *our deepest joy and the world's needs—meet*.

There is another conversion that needs to take place if we are to serve the least of these, and find Christ within them.

It is a CONVERSION OF THE HEART.

We have to move from concern for just ourselves,
to concern for those around us.

We have to move from a focus on **SELF—NEIGHBOR**.

This is different than just thinking about the people around you.

Often, when we do that, we think of people as ‘others’,
or we set up in our hearts and minds this separation of ‘*us vs. them*’.

When we move from concern for self to concern for neighbor,

We think of people as **PEOPLE, not projects**.

People *just like us*, with real lives, real stories, and real needs.

When we make that conversion of the heart, from self to neighbor,
we take the time to hear the stories of our neighbors.

We stop and LISTEN.

Really listen.

Theologian Paul Tillich used to say that “the first DUTY OF LOVE is to listen.”

Using our ears to really hear someone’s story is indeed a *sacred act*.

It is *holy ground*.

How often are you hearing someone speak,
but just thinking about what you will say next?

What does it mean to **TRULY LISTEN?**

When we truly listen—we stop and hear what someone says,
without thinking of ourselves or how we want to respond.

When we truly listen to the story of a neighbor,

We are open to how it might *affect* us, how it might *move* us.

We don’t go into the conversation with preconceived notions, ideas, or solutions.

That NOT easy, is it?

It's far easier, and more comfortable,
to enter a conversation with your mind already made up!
It's easier to immediately think of how to fix this person, right?

But that is ***not our calling as children of God,***
nor as Christians who follow in the footsteps of Jesus!

We are called to see, and hear, and listen to our neighbors,
Being ***open to what their needs really are,***
and ***how God might be moving us to meet*** some of those needs!

And sometimes, ***the HOLY SPIRIT drops new neighbors*** right at our doorstep!
Sometimes the Holy Spirit brings us opportunities to help and serve,
in new and surprising ways!

The ***Bridges*** program that meets here 5 days a week to help developmentally
disabled teens enter the workforce—
it was just a gift of the Spirit that they approached us,
and we had the opportunity to say yes!

The Session is meeting next Sunday night
to talk to an affordable ***faith-based counseling center*** that is interested
in using our church a couple of days a week
to offer counseling in this community.
We all know the power of counseling,
this might be a mission for us—and it was just a Holy Spirit action!

Moving from self-neighbor is about ***building RELATIONSHIPS.***
Not just helper and recipient,
but ***neighbor and neighbor.***

That's what we want to discover this year at FPCO—
how to be TRUE NEIGHBORS to our friends in Owasso,
and work alongside them to meet genuine needs.

Because the truth is, ***when we find the least of these, WE FIND JESUS.***
When we reach out to those who are hungry, thirsty, lonely, outcast, imprisoned,
we are reaching out to our Lord and Savior Jesus.

And the opposite is true.

As we reach out, JESUS REACHES OUT to us.

Maybe that's why it is *more blessed to give* than to receive.

Because in giving,

we receive so much more than we could ever dream or imagine.

In giving and serving, we receive that *deep joy*.

Friends, hear the *GOOD NEWS of the Gospel* for you today:

The least of these are all around us, and so is Jesus.

When we turn our hearts to our *neighbors*,

When we turn our minds to the *abundance* of God,

Our lives are changed—now and forever.

And for that, all God's people say, Amen.