

The Least of These
Matthew 25:31-46
November 26, 2017

Note: This is the sermon I planned to preach. When I got in the pulpit I discovered I printed my rough draft and had to “improvise.” I am so thankful to be the pastor of such gracious folks.

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. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴Then 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; ³⁵for 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.’ ⁴¹Then 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; ⁴²for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³I 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.’ ⁴⁴Then 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?’ ⁴⁵Then 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.’ ⁴⁶And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Jesus said, “I was hungry. I was thirsty. I was a stranger. I was naked. I was sick. I was in prison.” Those who heard him say this were shocked. “Really? That was you?” It’s not what they expected to hear. What is fascinating is that one group of people responded with compassion before they ever knew it was Jesus. They are genuinely surprised to learn that it was Jesus – but it isn’t what motivated them.

What Jesus is doing with this parable is offering a divinizing narrative. “What’s that?” you ask. I said, “divinizing narrative.” Jesus goes one step beyond humanizing these vulnerable and broken people – he divinizes them. He points to the last, the lost, and the least and says, “Meet God.”

In her recent book, “Braving the Wilderness,” Brene Brown has a chapter titled, “People Are Hard to Hate Close Up, Move In.” It is a chapter on what happens when we buy into dehumanizing narratives. She references the work of Michelle Maiese who studies the process of dehumanization. “Maiese explains that most of us believe that people’s basic human rights should not be violated – that crimes like murder, rape, and torture are wrong. Successful dehumanizing, however creates moral exclusion. Groups targeted based on their identity – gender, ideology, skin color, ethnicity, religion, age –are depicted as “less than” or criminal or even evil. The targeted group eventually falls out of the scope of who is protected by our moral code.”¹

In other words, the process of dehumanizing groups of people makes it possible for us to dismiss, despise, degrade, and even destroy other humans – by tricking ourselves into believing it is not somehow a violation of our basic moral code. It always begins with language and name calling and progresses from there.

¹ Brene Brown, “Braving the Wilderness,” Random House, New York, 2017, p. 73.

Sometimes it is very subtle. I can remember a professor who warned against putting the word, “the” in front of adjectives to identify people. While it is perfectly fine to put the word “the” in front of the freeway numbers, it is not okay to refer to other humans as “the poor,” “the homeless,” “the immigrants.” Some people might label this kind of fussiness as political correctness but accusing people of political correctness is our way of saying it requires effort and thoughtfulness to refer to our fellow humans as fully human.

Jesus could have easily given a little lecture saying, “Hey, feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, visit the sick and the imprisoned,” but instead he said, “God was hungry. God was thirsty. God was a stranger. God was naked. God was sick. God was in prison.” He divinized those often demonized.

Brene Brown speaks forcefully about the importance of not dehumanizing anyone. In the same chapter she says, “If our faith asks us to find the face of God in everyone we meet, that should also include the politicians, media, and strangers on Twitter with whom we most violently disagree. When we desecrate their divinity, we desecrate our own, and we betray our faith.”²

She’s right. It’s never okay. I once heard Desmond Tutu say, “When we greet each other we should genuflect as if to say, “The God in me, greets the God in you.” Divinize not demonize.

When we do this – we open the doors of empathy – we respond – we love – and God is fed, God’s thirst is quenched, God is welcomed, clothed, and visited. Our encounters with those he calls “the least of these” are divine encounters.

I am guessing that most of you know this full well. I am preaching to the choir. I know you to be compassionate and generous. We strive as a church to be compassionate. Yet we still have room to grow.

This past week I read a provocative book called, “Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help (And How to Reverse It).”³ I read this book with particular interest because of comments I heard at a community forum on homelessness. The panel included the director of Mercy House (who runs several of Orange County’s shelters), and a person from the Housing Authority who works with individuals who are homeless. They are well aware of the problems. One of the members of the panel spoke disapprovingly about the number of churches providing food, clothing, and laundry service to encampments of homeless people. A pastor replied defensively about the need for compassion. The panelist asked if it was compassionate to promote dependency.

What do you think?

The author says, “Because we are compassionate people, we have been evaluating our charity by the rewards we receive through service, rather than the benefits received by the served.” As I read this I started to get defensive. Is he suggesting we need to evaluate the return on our investment? Are we getting all the bang we can for the bucks we give? Once I calmed down I realized he was challenging us to ask the people we are supposedly helping if we are really doing what is needed for the long term.

As an example, he mentions the mission trip industry. Mission trips to impoverished countries are now a big business. Every year, religious mission trips consume billions of dollars creating experiences for people

² Brown, “Braving the Wilderness,” p. 76.

³ Robert D. Lupton, “Toxic Charity,” HarperCollins, New York, 2011.

who want to make a difference.⁴ But is this the best way to make a difference? What should we be doing and what should we stop doing in terms of responding compassionately to human need?

The author created an oath for compassionate service to serve as a starting point for conversation:

- Never do for impoverished people what they have or could have the capacity to do for themselves.
- Limit one-way giving to emergency situations
- Strive to empower the poor through employment, lending, and investing
- Subordinate self-interests to the needs of those being served
- Listen closely to those you seek to help, especially to what is not being said – unspoken feelings may contain essential clues to effective service
- Above all, do no harm.⁵

One of the stories he tells is about a talk he gave to a church group that operated a cooperative food ministry. When he challenged the rationale about giving food away one woman blurted out with surprising honesty. She said, “Churches want their members to feel good about serving the poor, but no one really wants to become involved in messy relationships.”⁶

Do you think that is true? It is so much easier to write the check, shop for gifts, and fill the food donation bin than it is to consider how we can be part of lasting change in our community.

We all know the expression, “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.” But what if you teach a man to fish and he is denied access to the pond? What if you teach him to fish and the pond is so polluted there are no fish left? The reality is that not everyone has the same opportunities. The deck is stacked against certain groups of people. Sometimes the most compassionate thing we can do is address the systems and injustice that keep people stuck.

Compassion requires all three. There is a time and place to give fish. Giving is easy. The rest is more difficult. Teaching and working for justice involves messy relationships and personal involvement.

Last week Father Gregory Boyle was interviewed by Krista Tippet for her “On Being” radio program. Boyle is someone I think exemplifies the kind of compassion that is needed today. He is a priest who serves in Boyle Heights who works with gang members to reclaim their lives and self-worth. He was instrumental in the creation of Homeboy Industries, providing job training and opportunities for meaningful employment to ex-gang members. He gets it. He’s not giving handouts – he is offering relationship. He can see past tattoos and criminal records to see God in the young men and women who land on his doorstep.

He doesn’t see himself as any kind of savior. In the interview he said, “I’m not the great healer, and that gang member over there isn’t in need of my exquisite healing. The truth is, it’s mutual, and that as much as we are called to bridge the distance that exists between us, we have to acknowledge that there’s a distance, even in service: a service provider; you’re the service recipient. And you want to bridge even that so that you can get to this place of utter mutuality...the measure of our compassion lies not in our service of those on the margins, but in our willingness to see ourselves in kinship.”⁷

⁴ Lupton, “Toxic Charity,” p. 5.

⁵ Lupton, “Toxic Charity,” p. 8-9.

⁶ Lupton, “Toxic Charity,” p. 57.

⁷ https://onbeing.org/programs/greg-boyle-the-calling-of-delight-gangs-service-and-kinship-nov2017/?utm_source=On+Being+Newsletter&utm_campaign=6a723247ef-

Mutuality and kinship. Those are important words for Boyle. He has received as much as he has given. No one is less than or least.

I don't know. Maybe all this was simpler back in Jesus' day. Maybe not. There are no easy answers or quick fixes. But there is compassion and people who care enough to struggle with the complexities of compassion. I know I want to be one of those people.

The people in the parable were surprised to learn it was God who came to them in need. The surprise ship has sailed for us. We know.

We know.