

ARE YOU...?

In today's reading are passages quoted quite often for the reason the church does what it does. In the history of the church down through the time the church has been a leader based on these passages. Hospitals, mission houses, the Underground Railroad, even colleges. Here in Des Moines are hospitals founded by Methodists, Catholics, and Lutherans. Colleges around Iowa have been founded by Methodists, Catholics, Lutherans, the Reformed, Baptists, Friends, and Presbyterians. Numerous charities in Des Moines and the surrounding area collect clothes, food and other items. Through missionary work we help dig wells, provide animals, and much, much more. However, I want us to look at these verses in a different light.

This story is preceded by last week's parable about the ten virgins and the parable of the talents. In each story an ending verse captures and sums up a powerful message behind the story. In Matthew 25 verses 10, 30, and 46 we are told in black and white the results of action or inaction.

On this week before the first Sunday in Advent, a time for preparation and waiting, what exactly are we doing with our time? *Like the verses in today's reading are we going to be the ones whose answer is "Lord, I didn't...?" Or "when did I have time?"* In another case, that of the ten maidens who did not use their time wisely to prepare, the door was shut on them. You can't say we are not given enough warning about that which lies ahead if we do not prepare or use our time wisely. After all it really is for our own good. *We cannot attempt to count the number of times we hear and say "there are so many things to do and no time", "I feel so rushed", "I am exhausted", "I just don't have time".*

In Mark 2:27 Jesus said to them, "the Sabbath was made to meet the needs of people, and not people to meet the requirements of the Sabbath." I believe Advent was created along the same lines. Advent was made to prepare us for his coming not us to prepare Advent. *What can we do to prepare for his coming? Today's reading does have answers - not only what we can be doing, but also how we can prepare ourselves.*

Looking at what, why and how we are living should be a priority if we are disciples of Jesus. *Like the article in the upcoming newsletter says, there has to be meaning to our lives, we are not here just to survive it!* I know many of you are working hard and you must provide for your family as 1 Timothy tells us "if you don't then you are worse than an unbeliever and have denied the faith." *So we must assess our priorities and determine if they are in order to maximize benefits for your family and you. We run here and run there for what? Is it for anyone's benefit or are we doing it because everybody is doing it? The money will be spent, but has the time been spent passing along a legacy of family and church?*

I know this church has multigenerational families attending and that just doesn't happen. Those things that really matter have been passed on and give us faith in the promises from the Old Testament about children and teaching them the important things, **that which really matters.**

In these passages there is a common theme with the other parables of the maidens and the talents – a sudden awareness of unwise action or inaction. It came from not prioritizing the things in one's life that are really important. *I strongly believe that Advent is one of those times, a season which God gives us to prepare, prioritize, and produce. Advent is a time he gives us to step back from all that distracts us, pulls us away from him. Advent is a time to renew our relationship with Jesus and deepen that relationship. How?* There are hints, if we take a slightly different view, in today's reading.

We are also reminded today that Thursday will be Thanksgiving and many will gather with family around a table filled with food. *Will we acknowledge that God has given us so much? It is one thing to thank him here at church with others, but when it makes you a little uncomfortable will you do it, right there in your home?* Being thankful is a life lived in gratitude, every day. God gave us His Son, who came to serve. We **must** be thankful to serve; after all He left us many examples from his ministry.

We call ourselves His disciples and He said" they will know by your love for one another". *How often though do we impose limits on how and when we are going to serve? To borrow a famous slogan of our time, we need to "just do it!" In today's reading I do not see footnotes containing exceptions or limits.*

One point to make clear here is we cannot have an attitude that the more I do, the more assurance I have to get to heaven. The fault with that thinking is we will never know if we have done enough! One thing that stands out in John Wesley's awakening is the realization found in Ephesians 2 "we are saved by grace through faith and it is a gift from God, not by works so that no one can boast." Out of the grace and faith we are given comes the gratitude and a willingness to serve others in love. Good deeds are the fruit of salvation; they are not the root of salvation. Good deeds do not make you a disciple, but if you are a follower of Jesus it is the flower of your faith. We tend as human beings to believe we did it all and we should get the praise! No, that isn't the way it works. The scripture tells us **every** good gift comes from above. God is good!!!! Each and every one of us can come up with an example of the grace and love God has shown to us. God is here in your life – good times and bad times. Are you...seeing Him? Take a longer look He is here.

There are specific needs addressed here, hunger, thirst, a stranger, and lack of clothing, illness, and prison. Can we eliminate all these problems? No, but that does not excuse us from doing our part in a way unique to us no matter how little or large our part may be. In Matthew 10 in the closing verses of the chapter Jesus has talked about receiving the messenger, because in their culture a messenger being received was the same as receiving the person sent by the messenger. The act of kindness Jesus sites is a cup of cold water. To me this emphasizes that a plain, loving act toward another is special in Jesus' eyes. Are you...sharing such acts with others?

Looking at these six actions here I am reminded of last week's Jewish six great works which brought credit in this world and reward in the world to come. Though we have stated that good works won't get you into

heaven, however these stories from Matthew certainly point to the fact that as a result of faith and grace the desire is there, from the heart, to serve others.

Now I would like you to walk down a different path with me, and look at these verses in a different light, putting a spiritual emphasis on thankfulness and preparation for Advent. When we take each of these six actions, spiritualize them, and apply them to the season there is much to take away and be useful in our daily walk no matter what season it is! Are you...ready to walk down a different path?

Hungry and you fed me. Looking at these words with “spiritual eyes” as a disciple, what are “feeding” others? Do we stand up and feed truth to people in love? In our class last Wednesday someone gave an example of hearing judgments of a fellow worker they knew not to be true and spoke up. The **truth** is what people want. We as disciples can or should be thankful for the fact that in the Bible is truth and there is power in it. *However, we must prepare ourselves and know the truth, and studying our “reference” book is to “arm” ourselves with the sword of the spirit – the word of God. Are you...digesting the word and feeding others who are hungry?*

Thirsty and you gave me a drink. Jesus told the woman at the well He was living water and she would thirst no more. *Where do we drink from?* Is it water that you know is safe or have you drunk from water that has been contaminated and contains that which is not good for your spiritual health? We can be thankful that we have Jesus and with Advent drawing closer we can renew our relationship with Him. The thing is He does not force us to drink, but He stands waiting for us to strengthen that relationship with Him. *Are you...ready to drink?*

A stranger and you showed hospitality. Do we “see” when people even close around us our a stranger and need to be invited into your neighborhood? I have heard numerous times of how people came to visit the church and there was this immediate sense of family and that they were at home here. Some knew people already here, others did not know anyone, but that must not make a difference, all should sense that they are being drawn into the family. Again in Jesus time the six great works, one of them was hospitality. You were welcomed into the family, Margaret and I were too and we are appreciative and thankful for it. We can do no less anytime a stranger comes in our door. Advent is by its very nature a time of preparation to invite Jesus to take a place in our hearts. Think of the baby Jesus coming into our world from heaven. It certainly must have been strange, but He accomplished the greatest work ever done in history!!! *Are you... ready to give a stranger hospitality?*

Naked, lacking clothes and you clothed me. Can we share our spiritual clothing with others? Grateful that God has given us His Son, what can we not give? Taking these words and picture someone spiritually naked, lacking the “clothes” to fight the good fight. *I am reminded of all the spiritual “clothes” we can put on.* When we live with an attitude of thankfulness we will be more than ready to share what we have with others. *Advent should remind us that when we prepare for the season what are we clothing*

ourselves with? Are we in that sinful nature with nothing but rags on? Advent allows us to choose clothes like a garment of praise, robes or righteousness and more. When we do choose such clothing we will stand out to others and I really believe people desire such "clothing" because we have been made in the image of God and there is a hunger for things of God. Are we...ready to choose such clothing and then willing to share or even give it up?

Sick and you visited me. *Spiritually, how many people are "sick" and need a visit? When we look back over Jesus' ministry there were numerous physical healings, but I believe we can assume a spiritual healing too. God has a strong interest in ones' spiritual health as well as the whole person. In visiting a sick person there is a lifting of the spirits. We can be lifted in spirit knowing that the love, grace and forgiveness of God heals us, and to what end?, to share those experiences with others. We never know when God will call us to visit someone and they may not be in a hospital! Are you...ready to visit?*

Lastly, visiting those in prison. *Not all prisons have bars. We can all be prisoners to many things at odds with god. Thankfully, there are things we have not been prisoners to, but we must help those who are and call on Jesus to help us set the prisoners free! Are you...ready to go out visit, and be a part of the healing process?*

In closing...

I had a friend at work and he remembers that his parents were has he thought at the time "bleeding heart liberals" visiting the disadvantaged and those in prisons. It was instilled in him and he was talking about visiting a guy we worked with that surprisingly to all of us was arrested for child pornography. Well, needless to say my first reaction was shall we say somewhat negative. Over the next few days and nights i searched my heart. It didn't help or I guess it did that my wife's favorite verses come from Matthew 25. I found myself writing for permission to be on the visitor's list. Not long after I was on his list, and I went down and visited Jeff. If you have never had a soul-to-soul conversation with someone, let me tell you, God is there in the midst of where two or more gather!!! I cannot put into words the conversation we had but I know God let me see through His eyes not mine and it was quite different!!! The visit was brief, but had a lasting effect. God's desire is to prepare to do and do that which really matters in this life and make a difference.

Jesus gave us the example, told many parables so we could understand what the kingdom of God is all about. *As He told disciples "you go, and do likewise"... are you?*

Amen.