

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.”

This gospel lesson haunts me. It haunts me because every time I hear it or read it, I think of the baby over in Haiti. A member of the Green Bay synod travelled there and was approached by a mother who was trying to give her baby away to anyone that was willing to take her. The reason she was giving her away? Because she couldn't feed her.

As a mother myself, I can't imagine the horror of not being able to provide food for my child. And then to be so frantic that she would give her child away? It is an act that only one who has reached total desperation can carry out.

And I can't stop thinking about that mother and baby. What happened to them? Did she find someone to take that child? Did someone help her? Did the baby die of starvation...which is one of the cruelest and most painful ways to die.

Sometimes when something is troubling me, I pray about it. And sometimes I feel better for praying. But praying for this young mother and her infant does nothing to bring me peace. Because I know that this is a situation where prayer isn't going to give that baby food or provide money for that mother.

What is going to help that family is someone DOING something. Someone giving that mother a job. Someone finding food for that baby. Someone taking them to a store and buying them groceries. Someone stepping in and DOING something to stop that desperate move to give away a baby.

And that is what this scripture verse confronts us with. Our faith is nothing if we don't DO something with it. Our faith means nothing if we don't act on what Jesus calls us to do. Our reading says, “I was hungry and you gave me food. Then they also will ask, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry? And Jesus replied, “just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.”

When a baby goes hungry and a mother has to give him or her away, we did not do it to the least of these. When a baby's most basic needs are not being met, we did not do it to the least of these. When a system in our society is set up so that some become billionaires and others starve to death, right under our noses, we did not do it to the least of these.

And you know what? We turned Jesus away. We let Jesus starve. We let Jesus reach that point of sheer desperation...we allowed it to happen and we WATCHED as that mother reached out her arms with her starving infant in them and asked that friend to take her child.

We WATCHED and did nothing. We turned the tv channel because we didn't want to think about it. We thought to ourselves, "that's someone else's problem to take care of...someone else will help out." We hugged our pocketbooks and checking accounts and savings accounts and thanked God that we didn't have to worry about that kind of thing in our home.

But we DID NOTHING. And each one of us is guilty of that. Do you know why? Because that little child was allowed to reach the point of starvation. And because she reached that point, because of our greed, because of our sin, because of our willingness to do NOTHING, because that mother couldn't find work, because of the hierarchy our society has set up, we are guilty.

We have allowed this to happen. And not one of us can say that we have done all we can to prevent such things from happening. We are all called out on this. Because until there is no more hunger, until there are no more children or people dying from starvation, we are all to blame and we have not done enough.

And we have neglected Jesus. Because whatever we do "to the least of these" we do to Jesus. Because Jesus is IN each person. Jesus is in that starving baby and Jesus is in that crying mother.

And our faith, our following Jesus means NOTHING if we don't act on it. Faith brings us comfort and it gives us good feelings. There is nothing wrong with that. But that's not what it's all about. It is about this gospel verse, and to not think about who "the least of these" are, is to leave holes in our faith.

Jim Wallis writes, "I was a seminary student in Chicago many years ago. We decided to try an experiment. We made a study of every single reference in the whole Bible to the poor, to God's love for the poor, to God being the deliverer of the oppressed. We found thousands of verses on the subject. The Bible is full of the poor.

In the Hebrew scriptures, for example, it is the second most prominent theme. The first is idolatry and the two are most often connected. In the New Testament, we find that one of every sixteen verses is about poor people; in the gospels, one of every ten; in Luke, one of every seven. We find the poor everywhere in the Bible.

One member of our group was a very zealous young seminary student and he thought he would try something just to see what might happen. He took an old Bible and a pair of scissors. He cut every single reference to the poor out of the Bible. It took him a very long time.

When he was through, the Bible was very different, because when he came to Amos and read the words, "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream," he just cut it out. When he got to Isaiah and heard the prophet say, "Is not this the fast that I choose: to bring the homeless poor into your home, to break the yoke and let the oppressed go free?" he just cut it right out. All those Psalms that see God as a deliverer of the oppressed, they disappeared.

In the gospels, he came to Mary's wonderful song where she says, "The mighty will be put down from their thrones, the lowly exalted, the poor filled with good things and the rich sent empty away." Of course, you can guess what happened to that. In Matthew 25, the section about the least of these, that was gone. Luke 4, Jesus' very first sermon, what I call his Nazareth manifesto, where he said, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach good news to poor people" -- that was gone, too. "Blessed are the poor," that was

gone.

So much of the Bible was cut out; so much so that when he was through, that old Bible literally was in shreds. It wouldn't hold together. I held it in my hand and it was falling apart. It was a Bible full of holes. I would often take that Bible out with me to preach. I would hold it high in the air above American congregations and say, "Brothers and sister, this is the American Bible, full of holes from all we have cut out." We might as well have taken that pair of scissors and just cut out all that we have ignored for such a long time. In America the Bible that we read is full of holes."

And that's exactly what happens when we focus only on the receiving part of faith. We receive grace. We receive forgiveness. We receive strength and hope and comfort and love. But there are gaping holes in our faith when we don't GIVE of our faith. When we allow systems to perpetuate poverty. When we turn away when someone holds up a sign that says, "will work for food." When we walk by a desperate mother trying to give her infant away. And it's not enough to simply say, "I'll pray for you." It's not enough to simply give the mother a dollar for food, even though that will help in that moment.

What we need to do is create environments where all who want to work can, and where all who want shelter can have it. And it's overwhelming to think of how much we need to do about it. It's scary and it seems impossible. But it's what Jesus calls us to do. And it's what that baby was crying for – a fair chance at life.

Please pray about how you can GIVE of your faith. God will show you the places where you are needed. Starting small is still a start. But when a group of people do small things to make a change, big changes begin to happen. Because until every mouth is fed, Jesus is still hurting. Amen.