

# Wading River Congregational Church

## SERMONS IN PRINT

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### Matthew 25

### "Service"

Mother Teresa of Calcutta, the Albanian nun who founded the *Missionaries of Charity* and served over 45 years among the poorest of the poor, was asked by an interviewer what motivated her work. "Serving the Christ within the poor," she said, much to the bafflement of the interviewers! Of course they had never read Matthew 25!

As we look at the work of the Holy Spirit among the people of God - the Church - we have come to a theme that runs through the whole NT from the life of Jesus on: *service*. Jesus made it central to being his disciple: *"the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you! Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant... for the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many"* (Mt 20).

By the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, the Christian apologist Tertullian said in defense of the Christians, *"Look how they love one another."* By the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the last pagan Emperor, Julian (who preceded Constantine) said *"nothing has advanced the Christian sect more than their charity to strangers... they provide not only for their own poor, but ours as well."* Service to other people, especially the poor, became the distinguishing mark of the new Christian communities.

### 1) *The Sheep and the Goats*

Jesus' words recorded in Matthew 25 were crucial. The context is "the Son of Man will return when you don't expect him," and your life and work will then be tested. So Jesus declares that his disciples should be alert and be found doing what they are called to do. Each should be sure that they have nothing to be ashamed of, and that his judgment on their lives will be *"well done, good and faithful servant, enter the joy of your Master."*

So the parable of *the sheep and the goats* (if parable is the right description of it - it's more like a *vision* of the Judgment) says "this is how you should live if you want to hear your Master's 'well done'." There are two interpretations of this passage to get out of the way first: one that older Dispensationalists favored sees this as judgment of *the nations for the way they have treated Israel*. That is of course how Jews had always seen the Last Judgment, but it doesn't fit here - either in the context of Jesus' teaching, or in the words used (*"the Son of Man will separate the people one from another"*) - it's individual, not national. A second view sees the "brothers of mine" as *missionaries sent out with the gospel of Jesus*, and judgment of those who accept or reject them and him (*cf.* Mt 10:40-42).

But most interpreters through history have seen something more: a call on *all Jesus' disciples to serve other people*. This is how they will demonstrate that they truly are his disciples, the "righteous ones" who have put their faith in him. Service to others is the evidence that they have faith in Jesus, and is a work of the Holy Spirit within them. Indeed various forms of service, helping, administering, are listed by Paul among the "charismatic" gifts given to the church by the Spirit (Rom 12, 1 Cor 12).

Most striking however is the way Jesus links serving others to serving him. It's as though Christians, who have been ransomed and are now Jesus' servants, have been brought into a great house expecting to serve their Master, running to and fro to meet his needs. But they are told that the way they will serve him is to *look after the other servants*, especially when they are hungry or need clothes or are sick, and to do the same for any strangers that come to the door. *This is a Christian's service to Christ: to serve other people in need*. And when you think about it, that's just what you might have expected: Jesus never wanted people to serve him; only to serve one another!

So the word *service* entered the Christian vocabulary in many ways. What Christians do when they gather to worship is called "*a service*" - in Greek *leitourgia* (liturgy) - the service of God through praise. The first helpers recruited when the Twelve are overwhelmed are seven men "full of the Holy Spirit" who acquire the name *Deacons* - from *diakonos*, for servant. By around 400 AD when the Church and the New Testament had been thoroughly Latinized, the Church's leaders were now Ministers; *ministri* - servants.

## 2) What Service?

So what "service" are Christians called to render to one another and to the world? In Jesus' story, the righteous serve by giving food to the hungry and liquid to the thirsty, hospitality to the homeless and clothes to the naked; they care for the sick and visit people in prison. These are examples; this is not an exhaustive list of service Christians can offer to one another, to people in their communities and around the world.

Some of these are "survival needs" - there are people who will die if they don't get food or drink. That was obviously true in the desert climate of 1<sup>st</sup> century Judea; it is still true today in many parts of the world. Read what our Women's Bible Study is doing, helping supply mothers of starving children in Africa with a life-saving mixture of peanut butter and dried milk! And even here, we have a steady stream of people come to our Food Pantry; our Thanksgiving collection will go to families in our area that we serve on a regular basis and also help replenish area Soup Kitchens and Food Banks that are seeing ever-rising demand and - of late - falling supplies. Hungry people on Long Island? Yes, and a lot of them!

How can that be? Do the math: a person making \$10 an hour for 40 hours a week will take home maybe \$350/week, \$1400/month. A one-bedroom apartment within 20 miles of here costs \$900/month. You now have \$500/month, \$125/week, left for gas, food, clothes, medicine, insurance. How far do you think that goes? For the working poor, food pantries become life-lines, survival mechanisms.

(Let me add that there are, and there are going to more, hungry people in our own congregation; if you are one of them, don't hesitate to tell me or Joe or Carolyn Baier or Danielle in the office that you would like to

take a bag of food – not so that “we can keep tabs on you,” but so that we know when our food stocks are being reduced and need to be replenished).

Homeless? Here and now? Suffolk County has the highest rate of mortgage foreclosures in NY State. How many months’ mortgage payment could you make out of your savings if you lost your job? Is there anything left to raid in your 401(k)? Middle-class families turn up in homeless shelters every day now. There is no limit to the need right here in our own back yard, and that doesn’t begin to scratch the surface of the huge needs in vast stretches of the world where people are lucky to live on a dollar a day.

What can we do, what should we do? What are we motivated to do? Or are we already overcome with “compassion fatigue” because we have seen too many pictures of hungry children? Perhaps we still think that feeding people is a job for the government, or the specialty of “liberal, social gospel” churches? Like many of you, I grew up in a time when Protestant churches were either “social justice” and “help the helpless,” or “Bible-believing, preach the gospel” types. Those were your options! Thank God that has changed radically, and it’s now not only possible but seen as *right* to both preach the gospel and help people in need!

Serving other people, according to Jesus and all the New Testament, is a mark of people’s faith. So I am delighted that our congregation not only has four Bible Studies and prayer groups every week, but also goes on CROP Walks, does Food Drives, collects Christmas gifts for homeless families that Sarah Benjamin serves through BOCES, has youth that raise money through World Vision’s 30-Hour Famine, take clothes and toiletries into NY City on “City Compassion” trips, provides and serves food for the Migrant Workers’ Dinner, visits people in

prison, – and so on. It is a good thing to be part of a church that has grasped that serving other people in the community, and looking after one another, are marks of Christian faith. I pray this will grow, and that we will find more practical ways to help people, beyond sending money!

### 3) *Why Are We Doing This?*

But let me close with a word about motivation. Did you notice in Jesus’ story how *surprised* the “righteous sheep” were about being rewarded for their service? They had not realized what they were doing. They had not calculated that serving “would make them feel better about themselves.” They had not even realized that in serving people in need, they would be serving *Jesus himself!* “*When did we ever see you hungry...?*” they ask him with amazement. After all, they would have rushed to help if someone had said “*Jesus is outside begging for food and shelter.*”

But he *was there*. Mother Teresa grasped that, and it gave her the motivation for her life’s work. If we want to please our Father in Heaven and bring praise to Jesus our Savior, he asks us to look after one another, and look after the needy people we meet. To turn away from that calling, to be indifferent to other people’s needs, is a *sin of omission* – failing to do the good we could do.

Behind Jesus’ story of sheep and goats lies an Old Testament vision given to the prophet Ezekiel. “*I will judge between one sheep and another,*” says the LORD. *Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture? Must you also trample the rest of the pasture with your feet? Is it not enough for you to drink clear water? Must you muddy the rest with your feet?... You shove with flank and shoulder, butting the weak sheep away with your horns until you have driven them away. I will save my flock... I will judge between one sheep and another.*” (Ezek 34:17-24).

Let us be sure that we are not trampling the pasture, or muddying the water, or butting the weak sheep away. In a hectic society like ours, that's very easy to do. We are - most of us - privileged to be "feeding on the good pasture." Let's be sure we make room for the weaker sheep. They are not morally deficient, they are not undeserving; they are just weak. Any one of us could be among the weak at any time - one fall, one bad diagnosis, one company closure, the passage of a few years... then how will *we* get to the feeding trough without help? Will there be anything left when the strong sheep have eaten? Let us pray...