

## **Olivia Dawson: Are You my Neighbour? Matthew 22:36-40 and Matthew 25 31-46**

The Senior Youth started this year discussing what it looks like to live in community with one another. We decided to create a covenant making promises to one another about what we want to accomplish in our youth group community. How, in our group, can we embrace differences, embrace humility, embrace conflict, and embrace forgiveness? We made promises like putting others ahead of ourselves, to speak truthfully and respectfully, to forgive and learn from our experiences, to welcome and respect all people. We also included things like promising to have food at our weekly gatherings and to bring Hannah's dog whenever there is unresolved tension in the group. So for the first school term we looked inward at ourselves, discussing what it means to live life together in community with one another. We began second term asking ourselves, so what? So we gather each week and talk about Jesus and pray together and laugh and play games and have fun but so what? What does it mean to be in community with one another...a community who desires to love and serve God *and* one another? What does that look like?

So a few weeks ago we looked at this Matthew passage. We spent our time asking ourselves who the "least of these" are that Jesus refers to. Who are the least of these in the world? In New Zealand? In Dunedin? We came up with a very thoughtful and prayerful list of those in our community that we have the capability to help. But...over the past couple weeks as I've reflected on that lesson and discussion and considered more deeply this passage, I've realized we went about it all wrong. The lesson we get from Jesus in this passage isn't to come up with a list of people who need our help. The focus of the passage isn't on the who but on the what. The parable says very clearly what compassion looks like. So why didn't Jesus give his disciples a clearer identification of the least of these? Why does he gloss over the who and focus his time on the what?

The passage is split into two parts – when Jesus speaks about the sheep (those who are righteous and show compassion) and then the goats (those who did not show compassion). Christ wants his disciples to love and serve as he does. And does Christ sit down and make a list of people who are less than? No, Christ shows compassion to those closest to him, to those he encounters on his journey, to those who ask for help, and to those who he seeks out because he knows they are in need. For Jesus it's not about the *who* but it's about what he does and how he serves and shows compassion. So why didn't Jesus give his disciples a clearer understanding of who the least of these are? Perhaps because doing so would automatically make us all goats. For showing compassion like Christ shows compassion is a way of life...not something we set aside time to do because we're supposed to.

This quest of modern Christians to identify the least ones as precisely as possible aligns us with the goats. Even the broadest definition of the least of these—as anyone and everyone in need – carries a similar consequence if the acts of compassion are motivated by the reward promised in the parable...or motivated to avoid the worst case scenario in the parable. If our actions are externally motivated than these actions are no longer compassionate. Are we helping because we are told we are supposed to or are we helping because it's who we are and who we want to be and because we're overcome with the love of Christ that we have *no choice* but to share it?

For so long the people Jesus spent time with based their life on a list of rules. That's why there always asking these clarification questions – who? Why? But but what? Because Jesus is asking them to forget those rules and live life differently. Jesus is trying to lead them away from being externally motivated – motivated by external consequences and rewards and instead be internally motivated – to have interest and enjoyment in the actions required.

If we take a look back at Exodus – when God spoke to Moses and his followers and gave them the 10 commandments – we remember that the rules came after a long journey through the

wilderness. They came after a lot of quarreling with Moses and questioning God. The commandments are a list of rules given to not only straighten these quarreling folks out but more so as a means to form and nurture an alternative community – a community bound not by common goals of wealth and prestige, but rather by loyalty to a God who has chosen to redeem a group of slaves from a life of bondage. The commandments are given to create a community where human beings can live fruitful, productive, and meaningful lives before God and with one another.

The first words of the ten commandments text spoken by God claims “I am the Lord your God...you shall not put *anything* before me” – the last commandment ends with the words “your neighbor.” Do not put anything before God --- look after, cherish, respect, love your neighbor. Life according to the commandments is fundamentally about radical commitment to God and compassion for the neighbor. The Commandments are intended to form the character of this community by cultivating a deep and enduring love for and loyalty to God, which then extends out to all creation. God’s instruction addresses these two realms of life – the people’s relationship with God and their relationships with one another. The first four instructions have to do with relationship with God; the last six with human relationships. Both are necessary for a healthy faith, but the order in which the instructions are given makes it clear that our relationship with humanity depends upon our relationship with God. One theologian writes, “it’s important to ‘get it right’ about God in order to ‘get it right’ about neighbor.” The call to treat humanity –all humanity - with respect, dignity and compassion is a direct outgrowth of the very being and nature of God. Now, that’s *all* humanity – without distinction or exception. Everyone. If we are to truly call God “our Lord” then we have no options, no excuses.

Love God, love one another. We hear it again in Matthew when Jesus is asked “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” The Law being referred to is the Torah which describes 613 laws. Determining the most important law was often a debate between scholars

and priests during Jesus' time. Jesus' first response would not have surprised the listeners, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." Those would have been familiar words. But then Jesus continues mentioning another, "The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself." This one would have been more of a surprise to those who listened to Jesus. Love your neighbor should be like loving God? The words, "the second is *like it*" suggests that our love for others should be like our love for God. Jesus is holding these two commandments next to each other – giving them both vital importance. One cannot exist without the other. They go hand in hand. Our love for our neighbor should be like our love for God. Meaning, our love for God *and* for humanity should be more than just a feeling – it should mean adhering to a covenant – it means our love should result in willing and doing – it means we aren't supposed to simply sit down and emit feelings of love for God and for others -- radiate these lovey dovey positive thinking feelings. It means we get up and we do. It doesn't mean we write checks and send thoughts and prayers. We put our love into action. We don't let our love for God or our love for humanity be only thoughts, feelings and words. We love our God through actions. We love our neighbor through actions. Our neighbor. Jesus says this like he did when he said "the least of these." He just kind of said it without any sort of explanation. Who are these people? Again, Jesus focuses on the what instead of the who. Making the focus on the action of showing compassion and doing justice.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a theologian who wrote before and during WW2 speaks of loving our neighbor. He first asks the question, "Who is God?" and responds by saying that God is known through the encounter of Jesus Christ, who exists only for others. Having faith is participating in this "being there for others" that is shown to us by Jesus Christ. Therefore, says Bonhoeffer, "the transcendental is not infinite and unattainable tasks, but the neighbor who is within reach of any given situation" In other words, experiencing God, having a divine, sacred, out of this world moment is not impossible. It's not unattainable like we might think. Instead, it's what happens

when we spend time with one another. It's what happens when we care for the neighbor who is within reach of any given situation. Caring for the neighbor who is within reach.

Some of you know that early in my ministry career I was a hospital chaplain at the downtown hospital in Richmond Virginia in the States. I worked there for about a year and a half while I was earning my Masters in Patient Counseling. Working there I have experiences I hope I'll never forget and frankly experiences I can't wait to forget. I met many people, was invited into many lives. I shared many tears and much laughter with people I had never met before and will most likely never cross paths with again. I learned so much about life, love, death, family, about grief. My "neighbor" became the lonely patient, the angry family member, the tired medical staff. But those were expected. The unexpected neighbors are the ones who left the greatest impression on me and resulted in the visits I learned the most from.

One particular visit occurred mere seconds after my shift began. I walked into the pastoral care office and the overnight chaplain handed me the pager and said I needed to immediately go downstairs to the pediatric emergency room. Good shifts usually begin with a chance to grab a cup of coffee, wander to hospital units to greet nurses with a friendly smile, collect yourself before the long day. Good shifts generally don't start with someone handing you the pager before the office door closes behind you. But it's those shifts that begin before you even arrive that you tend to remember and learn from. So I took a deep breath and made my way downstairs, after being told the mother of the patient was in the waiting room. A young mother had come rushing in after receiving a phone call from her baby's father that their little girl was brought to the hospital because she was found in her crib not breathing. The baby's father had to stay home with the other children, so the baby was at the hospital by herself. The mother was on the bus coming home after working her overnight shift when she got the phone call. She then got on a different bus so she could come to the hospital. I could see the mother in the corner crying. There was another woman with her. I assumed the other woman was a friend or relative of the

woman. So I walked up to the two of them and after introducing myself I inquired about their relationship, attempting to engage in conversation to calm their nerves while we waited for an update from the doctor. The woman whose arms were wrapped tightly around the mother as she cried worried tears informed me that they had just met. The woman was sitting behind the mother on the city bus when the baby's father called. The woman overheard the conversation and then leaned forward over the seat and said to the mother, "you're not going to that hospital by yourself. I'm going with you." The woman, who had never met this mother before, accompanied her to the hospital, held her in her arms, and sat with her through the long waiting period and through the conversation with the doctor when the mother was told her daughter had died. The stranger on the bus sat with the mother for hours, through the shock of the doctor's news, and wept with the mother, while they waited for family members to arrive. No one ever wants to receive information about their loved one dying. But the mother didn't hear it alone. She received the information while being held in the arms of a stranger. The woman missed work and sat through heartbreaking information, comforting a woman she had just met moments earlier. Witnessing this encounter and being invited into this sacred moment, brought a whole new meaning to the words love your neighbor.

For loving your neighbor is inconvenient. It's reacting to a moment without hesitation. It's treating a stranger the way you'd like to be treated. It's loving God so much that you show no hesitation to show that same love to another person.

God sets up a covenant with us, gives us these commandments, not to make our lives difficult or make us feel guilty. And certainly not to give us permission to sit on our high horses and wonder who the least of these are around us that need our help. God gives us these commandments as an attempt to ensure that everyone feels loved – that everyone has the opportunity to be included, cared for, and worried about. When our neighbor becomes everyone within reach, God's love becomes impossible to avoid. When we allow our love for God to

transform our relationships with *all* of humanity – God’s compassion is experienced through our own.

A few weeks ago I showed the senior youth a video of Kid President. A young guy who makes youtube videos and gives “pep talks” to his audience. We watched one titled “Kid President’s letter to a person on their first day here.” Some of our favorite quotes from the speech included: “being a person is hard sometimes. You should give them a high five just for getting out of bed!” or “You’re awesome. You’re made that way. You were made from love, to be love, to spread love,” or “Love is always louder. No matter what. Even if hate has a bullhorn, love is louder. So let your life be loud!” But the one we ended our conversation with that stuck with me was, “Remember to let everybody know, you’re glad they’re here.” We were all created out of God’s love to be love and share love. And what better way to show someone that you’re glad they are a part of God’s great creation? To show compassion. We were created to love a God who loves us more than we could ever begin to comprehend. And one of the simplest most effective ways of experiencing God’s love is through the love and compassion shared by one another. What can you do to show love? What can you do for the neighbor within your reach – at home, at school, at work, at church? How can you effectively show the meaning behind the words, “I’m glad you’re here.”

As Christians we are meant to be witnesses of our faith. Sometimes we fool ourselves into thinking that living out our faith begins and ends with us sitting faithfully in a church on Sunday morning. While that’s important, that’s not where it stops. Jesus told us that we are to love God and our neighbor AND GO out into the world. We love and we do. It’s not a spectator sport, it’s not a passive religion this thing called Christianity. It’s not one you can sit through, watch and cheer for. It’s one that requires boldness, courage, and faith enough to care for the neighbor within reach.

Will you pray with me...

Gracious God...give us courage to get up...to take our faith outside of these walls and into the world. To take the love that you have given us and share it with our neighbor within reach. Help us to feel so overwhelmed by your love that we have no choice but to share it through our compassion for others. Amen