

**Rev. Dr. Tom Glenn**  
**“The Least of These”**  
**First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**  
**Sunday, November 22, 2020**

***Ephesians 1:15-23***

*I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love towards all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.*

***Matthew 25:31-46***

*‘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. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then 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; for 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, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” Then 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? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And 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.” Then 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; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I 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.” Then 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?” Then 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.” And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.’*

Let us pray. Our gracious and living God, may your spirit of justice, of compassion, and of peace fall upon us as we hear Your word read and may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in Your sight. You are our strength and redeemer. Amen.

Well, right at the get-go I must confess that over the years of my ministry I've had a kind of love/hate relationship with this passage. Hate might be too strong a word, but reading this passage always produces a nagging kind of guilt inside of me, maybe it does in you as well. And it produces questions like, "am I among the sheep or the goats?" I can certainly always think of times I might have passed by a homeless person who's asking for money and did nothing, not even greet that person. Or a time when I may have forgotten to make a food donation on the appointed day. Have I visited anyone in prison? Well, not lately I'll have to admit. I have volunteered for Room at the Inn here in the church, but is that enough to keep me in the category of being one of the sheep? Questions? And the other thing that bothers me about this passage is that it seems so harsh. Those classified as goats going into the eternal fire, going into eternal punishment, it does seem to fly in the face of the loving, gracious, compassionate, grace-filled God whom we worship. But then we must remember that we are urged not to focus on just one passage or just an isolated part of that passage in the biblical text. But to take in the whole, to take in the complete reading of scripture especially when we are considering big issues like the nature of God or the substance of Jesus ministry and message.

It is pretty crucially important not to isolate one passage and base a great deal of our belief on that one passage while neglecting the whole of scripture. And when we consider the whole, seems to me that the Gospel record plus many of the texts in the Old Testament speak of a loving, forgiving God, who over and over and over again, takes us back from our wayward ways. So, yes, there are things that bother me about this passage, but I have to say overall I do resonate with it, and in many ways, I love reading it, because it does line up with my ultimate understanding of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ: the kindness, the caring that is exhibited, the reaching out to those on the margins of our society, the down and out. That does really sing throughout this passage. Indeed, when we say we want to follow Jesus, when we sing, "We want to be a Christian in our hearts," or, "They'll know we are Christians by our love," this passage characterizes what it seems, to me, we strive to do. We may not do it perfectly. Obviously, we don't do it perfectly, but it is the ideal. It is that toward which we strive.

Another observation about this text. I think one of the big mistakes that we make along the way in interpreting this passage for our own lives is that we limit it, limit it to simply our own individual personal life, individual personal actions and response. Now, that in and of itself, is not wrong. Please don't misunderstand me. We do, of course, examine our own individual actions when we read it. And we do wonder where we might have fallen short in feeding the hungry or clothing the naked or not welcoming the stranger or not visiting the sick or the imprisoned. And that, my friends, is entirely appropriate. But I want you to notice at the very beginning of the passage when it states, "All the nations will gather before Him." All the nations, corporate, communal, community. You see, what we have to remember is that the people of the first century, those that first listened to Jesus' message, those who lived in the time of Jesus, they were much more oriented to thinking communally, not simply individually. Our society places a high, high value on rugged individualism on a kind of separateness, uniqueness. I would submit to you, we do not automatically think in a communal sense like they did. We do not automatically think of we as opposed to I. And we must also remember that the Hebrew prophets who preceded

Jesus thought of and spoke to the whole community, the whole nation. When they spoke of justice, it was not just to the individual person. Perhaps was even more so to the whole community, the whole nation, the whole group. And Jesus saw himself in this tradition of the law and the prophets.

And so I think when we read this as a church, it is important to consider these words feeding the hungry and clothing the naked and so on, both in terms of individual action and social policy and justice. Father Gregory Boyle who is the founder of Homeboy Industries, which is a ministry of outreach to gang members in the Los Angeles area and also the author of the book, *Tattoos on the Heart*, he tells the story of the parish, the parish that he served at the same time that he was doing the outreach ministry. The year was 1987. The church he served was called Dolores Mission Church in Los Angeles. And that church took a corporate action in 1987 by declaring itself a sanctuary church. And they were doing so in response to a law that was passed by the California legislature in 1986 and Immigration Reform and Control Act that was quite restrictive.

Now, soon the church found itself hosting each night men from Central America and from Mexico who would sleep each night in the church. The women and children who were with them were hosted by a convent that was nearby, not the church. But a problem began to develop within the church because once these homeless men began to sleep in the church each night, there was the next day the faintest, slightest smell evidence that they had been there. On Sunday mornings, Father Boyle said they would, as he described it, "foo foo the place as best they could within an inch of its life." Sprinkling I Love My Carpet on every rug in the church, and they would vacuum like crazy, they would strategically place Poo-Pourri and Air Wick all around to combat this lingering faint but pervasive reminder that nearly 50 to 100 men had spent the night in the church each night of the week. They even tried incensing the sanctuary before the 7:30 Mass, which was the earliest mass before that mass crowd would arrive. Still, try as they might, the smell remained. And as you might expect, the complaining and grumbling began to set in. And some people began to speak of going to church somewhere else. Now, understand the smell was not overwhelming, but it was undeniably there, as was the complaining and grumbling. Now, Father Boyle is a Jesuit priest, and the Jesuits have a saying that if you can't fix the problem, then feature it. So, Boyle and his staff decided they would address this discontent in their homilies on Sunday morning. Now, homilies back in that time, around 1987, were often dialogic in manner. That is, the pastor giving the homily would ask a question and then expect a response, brief response from people out in the congregation.

So, Boyle, he began one Sunday morning with this question, "What does the church smell like?" Of course, seeking some response. Well, instead, he said people were mortified. Suddenly heads were down. Eye contact lost. Women searching through their purses for they knew not what. "Come on now," Boyle throws back at them. "What's the church smell like?" Finally, one old man stood up, and he boomed out, "Smells like feet." He really didn't care what other people thought of him. He just knew he was old and honestly didn't care. "Excellent," said Boyle. "Why does it smell like feet?" Because homeless men, many of them, slept here last night," a woman responded. "Well," Boyle said, "Why then would we let that happen here? "It's what we've committed to do," said another. "Well," Boyle said, "Why would we commit to doing something like that?" After a little bit of a pause, another person responded, "It's what Jesus would do."

"Well then, what's the church smell like now?" Boyle said. And a man stands up and bellows, "It smells like commitment." And the place cheers. And a woman named Guadalupe, in her enthusiasm, stands up and waves

her arms wildly and says, "Smells like roses." And the packed church roars with laughter. And in that laughter, a newfound kinship that embraced someone else's odor as their own, that was discovered. "Inasmuch as you do it to the least of these, you do it to me," said Jesus. It's a reminder of our oneness of our ultimate communion with all of humanity following Jesus. Boyle ends by reminding us of this: compassion, he wrote, isn't just about feeling the pain of others; it's about reaching out and bringing them in toward yourself.

If we love what God loves, margins are erased in what we do both communally and individually with justice and compassion. Becoming one with the least of these. Amen.