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Isaiah 61:1-3a; Matthew 25:31-46

Faithful Presence with the least of these

First Mennonite Church

Back in Matthew 24, the disciples wanted to know the signs of the times after Jesus predicted the destruction of the Temple. The disciples asked: *Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?*

What are the signs of the times when the world will come to an end?

Even though Jesus told them no one knows about that day and hour, *neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father*, good and well-meaning Christians have chosen not to listen to that advice, and instead become side-tracked by the disciples' question: *Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?*

Perhaps anticipating that Jesus' disciples will continue to speculate when the end will come, Jesus spent two chapters in Matthew (24 and 25) telling his disciples how to be and act as his followers: simple things like keeping awake, keeping their eyes wide open to where God was moving, and following the way of Jesus here and now.

The image before us in our scripture passage today is where Jesus gives his final answer to the disciples' question about the signs of the times. It's an image of the final event of all life in the history of the world. The Bible conveys the unwavering conviction that history and human life have direction and purpose. Life and history are not according to random chance or accident. Neither is life a cycle of repetition or an endless return of the same old thing. God is in control of history. History, according to the Bible, has an Alpha and an Omega, a beginning and an end. There

was a genesis of all life; there will be a consummation, fulfillment at the end of time.

When will that be? A better way of asking the question is, **WHO** is the alpha and omega? **WHO** is the beginning and the end?

Do you know the answer?

Jesus. Jesus is the alpha and omega, the beginning and the end according to Revelation 1:8. Are you surprised by this answer? If you are, then you are not alone. Both the sheep and the goats in today's passage of scripture were totally surprised by this answer.

Both those praised for caring for Jesus and those condemned for not caring respond with the same stunned, jaw-dropping surprise:

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? (Matthew 25:27-39, 44)

The sheep are commended because they've been out doing what ordinary, Christians do every day: they've shared meals with others, spent time visiting the sick, visiting people in prison, sitting with other over a cup of coffee listening to others share their stories. They are astounded that this is the way their lives are being judged.

And the goats are also astonished. Maybe, they were too busy pouring over their Bibles trying to figure out if the word, pestilence in Matthew 24 equaled Covid-19! They were diligent but found wanting.

Notice the way Jesus evaluates their lives: it's through six works of mercy to the least of these. Giving food to the hungry, clothing the naked, giving drink to the thirsty, visiting the sick, welcoming the stranger, and visiting those in prison.

Who are the least of these? This term is defined differently by different people. I define it broadly to include those in need, those struggling physically or mentally, the financially poor, those in prison, and those who are broken, which is why I asked Melita to create a display of broken and chipped dishes. We are all broken in different ways. Yet, we are all God's treasure in clay jars, as Paul puts it.

Each of these six acts of mercy is unbelievably simple: when I was sick you visited me. It doesn't say you cured me. Nor does it say what a hero you were for labouring away in the laboratory in a desperate search to find a vaccine for the Covid-19 virus. Don't get me wrong, all of those scientists working at finding a vaccine for Covid-19 is a great thing, and we can pray for them. But, here in the text it points to something much simpler. What it says is, when I was sick you cared for or visited me. Of all the many things you could do at this very moment in history, **you took the time, cared for me enough to visit me.**

The same goes for visiting those in prison. Last fall, we had Dave Feick from Micah Mission in our adult education class. He talked about the many systemic problems with our criminal justice system, disturbing problems like the following: if Indigenous people in Canada make up about five per cent of the country's population, then why do they make up 30 per cent of Canada's prison population?¹ This is an alarming statistic that should concern everyone, including the church. I can't say more because that's beyond the scope of my sermon today. But Dave also talked about how important it was for ordinary people to visit those in prison, something our scripture passage also mentions. Jesus says, I was in prison and you visited me.

These six acts of mercy are highlighted in this passage to remind us where our attention, our focus, our priority needs to be. It should **NOT** be in speculating when the rapture will be, who is the Anti-Christ, or spending hours wondering how Covid-19 might be a sign the world is coming to an end. No! These six acts of mercy are here to remind us of the following:

1. First, you don't need a university degree to be a disciple of Jesus. Following Jesus IS NOT rocket science. Do you really want see God, encounter God? Surprise! You can find God, encounter Jesus in the hungry, the sick, the naked. You're wondering how best to follow Jesus? Care for the sick, practice hospitality, keep company with the least of these. Do the kinds of things you would naturally do for your family, because the least of these are members of God's family.
2. Second, our attention and focus must be on living **today** as disciples for we know that God is in control of history and has promised to bring about a new heaven and a new earth.

¹ <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/asithappens/as-it-happens-tuesday-edition-1.5434678/soaring-rates-of-indigenous-people-in-prison-unacceptable-says-federal-watchdog-1.5434693>

3. Finally, because Jesus is the sign of the end of the age, **we have time**, as Jesus did: to feed the hungry, visit the sick, comfort the comfortless, welcome the stranger, and visit the prisoners. Christians claim to have seen and experienced Jesus. **The difference between followers of Jesus and those who do not know Jesus is that those who have seen Jesus no longer have any excuse to avoid the least of these.**²

I sometimes watch mobile phone advertisements just to see how companies are pitching the latest technology. Often companies will show the great photos one can take even in low light. Other times they will show how fast and smooth their latest operating system works. I enjoy that kind of stuff. A few weeks ago, a pastor colleague of mine joked that mobile phones—while you can send/receive emails, take photos/videos, maintain your calendar, you can even call and talk to someone on it!

During this extraordinary time we find ourselves in, we can't be physically present with others, but we can pick up the phone and be present with others. Show up. Take time to be with others even if it's on the phone.

The early church understood that the space between followers of Jesus and the least of these was sacred space. It was holy ground. Please remember that the early church was a tiny minority in the huge Roman Empire. They were marginalized, had no political or economic power. So, they didn't rely on big budgets, well-designed programs, elaborate worship services to do the work of the church, but they relied on **presence—on being with others**. In fact, some early church writers called the poor **the temples of God**, because they believed Christ presence was especially among the poor. The early Church lived with the understanding that being with the least of these, working on relationships—this activity **created space for a direct encounter with Jesus Christ**.

Contrast that with the story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16. The rich man lived in his comfortable home—warm in winter and cool in summer while Lazarus sat outside the gate, hungry and alone. The rich man's sin was not that he was rich. Wealth isn't a sin. I can easily imagine that the rich man was rich through ethical means. Maybe he inherited it. Maybe he was really smart or just happened to be at the right place and the right time. The problem with the rich man is that he couldn't see beyond what he had accumulated, couldn't see Lazarus

² from "Matthew (Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible)" by Stanley Hauerwas

sitting by his gate, day in and day out. When he looked out of his window, he saw the beautiful trees and his well-manicured lawn. When he drove to his office, he saw business opportunities everywhere. And at the end of the year, as his accountant worked on his taxes, his accountant suggested cutting a cheque to MCC or the United Way out of all his profits.

Day after day, year after year, the rich man lived his life. He had his daily habits, his well-established routine. He was used to seeing the world in a particular way, and this blinded him from seeing the suffering, the pain, the brokenness just outside his gate. Never once did he notice this desperate form huddled form outside his gate. He could have, if only he had gotten up from his table, went outside his gate, sat with Lazarus and listened to his story.

The early church grew from a tiny minority to eventually becoming the official religion of the Roman Empire in the 4th century. Now, there were all sorts of bad things that came about because of the church having official status—and I won't go into them at this time—but the point I'm trying to make is how God grew the church because ordinary people modelled their lives on Jesus. They took the time to be **faithfully present with the least of these**.

Being present with people. There is a difference between being **for people** and being **with people**. Being for people is a very good thing. People, churches, and organisations who are **for people** may do things like advocate to City Hall, the provincial or federal government for programmes and policies that enhance the life of the poor and marginalized. For example, in January of this year, the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of Regina said Saskatchewan's child poverty rate is 26.2 per cent. Practically, this means that **one child in four lives in poverty**. Think about that for a moment. Out of every 4 children in SK one lives in poverty. The article went on to say that SK ranks third highest in Canada, behind Nunavut and Manitoba in child poverty.³ As Christians, this should concern us. Being **for people** in this instance may mean letting the various levels of government know about our concerns about this. As it says in Proverbs 31, "*Speak out for those who cannot speak*" (Proverbs 31:8-9). We sometimes must be the voice of the voiceless.

In contrast to being for people is **being with people**. Back in February when we could still meet together—my, that seems like a lifetime ago—we invited Jody Buckley, the *Volunteer and Event Coordinator* at the Friendship Inn to FMC to talk

³ <https://thestarphoenix.com/news/saskatchewan/1-in-4-children-in-sask-in-poverty-study/>

to us about the faces of poverty in Saskatoon. She talked about many of the systemic issues around poverty, things like mental illness, government policies that push people into poverty and keep them there. But, one very important point she highlighted was how important it was for volunteers to get out of the kitchen where they helped prepare the food or get out from behind the counter where volunteers served the food, walk to a table, sit down and begin visiting with those at the table. She even gave us tips for how to start a conversation. She said, introduce yourself and then ask the person to tell you their story. And then listen to their story, she said.

Peter Maurin, a French Catholic, once wrote: To reach the man on the street, you must go to the street.⁴

Being with people. When adults talk with children it's important get down on your knees so that you are at their height. There's something about being at the same eye level allows you to be more fully present with them. God didn't stay up in heaven telling us how much God loved us, but God came down to our level and lived among us. God moved into our neighbourhood and was present with us.

Being present with others. Showing up. It's so simple. It's not as sexy as speculating about when the world will end, mapping out the different dispensations and wondering will it all end. This way of reading the Bible is false, by the way. But, my point here is to simply say that Jesus has told us where our attention and focus must lie. Live as disciples **today** for we know that God is in control of history and has promised to bring about a new heaven and a new earth. Show up. Spend time with others. Build relationships with others.

Too often we turn the poor into a program—put a few cans of soup or a box of cereal into the Foodbank bin. Please don't get me wrong. This is very an important thing to do because it helps the Foodbank to feed needy people. This is very important. But, the problem with this model, is that well-intentioned programs to help the poor, unfortunately keep the poor from being a part of our lives and prevent us from being present with the poor at our tables.

Jesus doesn't just call us to give to the poor, as great as that is. He calls us to be in relationship with the poor – being with the poor in such a way that they become family. He promises to be present here. Programs are important and should

⁴ from "Matthew (Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible)" by Stanley Hauerwas

continue. But we must not believe that programs will ultimately redeem the world. It is presence over programs. By tending to the presence of Christ among the poor (where Christ already is present) we find our own experience with Christ deepened.

The disciples wanted to know what the signs of times would be when the world would end. Jesus told them that was none of their concern for God has already set a goal for all of history—a new heaven and a new earth. What's most important is to be faithfully present with others. Take time to be with the least of these.