

Newsletter Reflections for September

Sometimes it amazes me how things just seem to all come together in my mind. At the July Presbytery meeting, which was held by Zoom because of the pandemic, the Presbytery voted overwhelmingly to become a Matthew 25 Presbytery. This is a movement which began taking root a couple of years ago as an outgrowth and vision of the Presbyterian Mission Agency. It takes its name and its focus and its theology from a very particular foundation in our scripture: Mathew 25: 31-46. This passage has a particular designation which in most of our translations with inserted subtitles for separated passages is this: *The Judgment of the Nations*. It clearly draws an image with which many are uncomfortable. As it happens, since I usually follow the lectionary suggestions and this is Year A, Matthew's turn as the featured gospel, this particular passage will come before us at Olney on November 22nd. The majority of the gospel message is that the message is literally the good news...that God loves us so very much...that God came and dwelled among us to establish that truth for us so convincingly that we could accept God's gift of grace...and to accept as amazing as it is...that it is a free and unmerited gift. However, God expects us to respond to that gift of amazing love with certain changes within ourselves...accepting being so loved allows us to also respond with love. And that is the other major thread woven throughout the gospel message...that we are called to love and care for others as we are loved...because we are so loved. The message is that because God so loves us, we therefore must also love. And, if you think about it, God's message of steadfast love and the message to care for others did not begin with Jesus but well before the incarnation...long ago with what was first given as guidance to the Hebrew people at Mount Sinai and then through the voices of all the prophets...the guiding call was a message that God loved and wanted to create a community of people who were loved and loving. God is nothing if not consistent about loving people, about desiring to be in relationship with us and desiring us to be in loving communities with one another...and so we come to Matthew 25:31-46. When we arrive at this passage we are nearing the end of Jesus' earthly ministry. It is found recorded in the last few days of his life spent teaching in Jerusalem. When he describes this scene which will occur at the final reckoning...the time when judgment will be passed on all people and nations: Jesus says there will be two groups. Jesus says this of the first group...those who will be blessed by the Father "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." These folks seem astonished, for they do not remember doing this for the "king". They had cared and tended the hungry, the thirsty, those who needed, out of love even though they had not "seen" them as the "king" but just as ones for whom they should care. I'm sure you now remember the details. Those who are judged and sent away also don't remember NOT doing these things for the "king". Because the "king" was present in "the least of these" for whom they had not cared. What strikes me as the most dramatic and poignant thing about this scene is that

neither group has recognized the “Son of Man” in those who they encounter during their life’s journeys. The ones who had acted “righteously” had done so not because they saw the “king”, but because they saw ones who in another gospel narrative were among “the least, the lost, or the last”. They were not acting in order to serve the “king”, or at least not because they saw those they aided as “the king.” Those who had failed to serve any in this group seemed to be dismayed and indicated their dismay. Of course, if they had known that the “king” had been among those they had not helped, then it seems their actions would have been very different. It seems that in this passage there is an issue which appears as a major focus in another gospel narrative, that of John. In John’s gospel there is an underlying theme not only of light and darkness, but of sight and blindness. In this descriptive passage titled *The Judgment of the Nations*, it seems that the ability to see the image of God in others is sadly lacking in both those who act righteously and those who do not. In this passage it is not stated why those who acted righteously did so, only that they did care for those Luke would have termed among “the least, the lost, or the last” and so fulfilled the call of discipleship. When you reflect on it, the message from all of our gospels is clear: we are given a message of good news that God loves us and that love is very inclusive. The question we need to answer is when we look at the world around us, are we among those who are blind and cannot see? Or do we look and see God’s image and presence in all?

Shalom,

Pastor Libby