

Stepping forward in Gratitude

Psalm 100; Matthew 25:31-46

Every step counts. Every word of gratitude makes a difference. Every action we take, and every decision we make can change the future when we live our lives in faith, hope and love. Jesus said that when we feed someone, when we cloth someone, when we care for someone, when we show compassion, “When you did it to ONE of the least of these, my family, you did it to me.” When we commit to living lives of faith where we love each other and our neighbour as ourselves, when we praise God with our heart, soul, mind and body, and when we give with a generous heart we will see the face of Christ in each person. How will you live out your faith now? What legacy shall we leave those who come next?

This passage from Matthew is commonly referred to as the final judgement by biblical scholars. Being judged is not a comfortable feeling, and as Christians we wrestle with the image of Jesus who loves us unconditionally with a Jesus who will return to judge us, to as the scripture says, separate the sheep from the goats.

One of the prayers that I love which is often spoken at funerals and memorials is:

“We pray that nothing good in the life of this person will be lost, but will be of benefit to the world; that all that was important to them will be respected by those who follow and that everything they valued will continue to mean much to us not that they have died. We ask that they may live on in the hearts and minds of their family and friends, inspiring courage, informing conscience.”

As Jesus prepares for his death and resurrection, he too shares this sentiment with the disciples. I found Lindsey P. Armstrong’s reflections on this passage very helpful. She suggests that Matthew’s depiction of the final judgement is more of a wellness check, like going to the doctor’s for an annual check-up. She says, “its purpose is not to condemn or scare but to provide a snapshot of our overall health development learning and growth that should lead to new habits and ways of life. For God wants us to flourish.”¹ Jesus is very clear in this passage, we are **not** expected to feed, cloth, provide shelter, care and compassion to every single person. He states when you did it to **ONE** of the least of these, my family, you did it to me. And let’s not get caught up in decided who is the least of these. All that is required of us, is to show care and compassion to someone who is vulnerable, which is all of us at different times. Jesus is inviting us to look and see the face of Christ in every person we meet. The dividing of the sheep and the goats is Jesus way of reminding us that there are consequences to our actions. This final

¹ Lindsey P. Armstrong, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 4, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011, p. 33.

judgement speech names that we will be judged on **how we treat other people**, to love is to live.² If we return to the image of this final judgement as a wellness check, then the separating of the sheep and the goats can be seen as a diagnostic tool. One that is designed “to inspire faithfulness, root out self-centered living, and help each of us measure how and where we are as we grow in the likeness of Christ.”³

This is a good day for our wellness check as it is the last day of the Church calendar, the Reign of Christ, and it is also Gratitude Sunday. This is a day when we are called to recommit ourselves to living out our faith in this world. This is the day when we recommit ourselves to God, and following Jesus’s example. Jesus lives on in the world through each and every one of us for we are the body of Christ. I have always like the hymn:

“Christ has no body now but yours, no hands but yours hear on this earth yours is the work, to serve with the joy of compassion...Your hands heal the wounded world...your eyes find the lost...your feet journey walk this world with mercy and justice.” More Voices 171

One more step back into the future. This has been the theme for Gratitude month. As we look back at the over 100 years of history of this faith community we see the commitment to being a scared, welcoming and compassionate presence in this city, and in the world. This building has been a home to many, a place of healing, a place of learning, a place of hospitality to people in need. Almost 50 years ago, the people of Robertson United and the people of Wesley United made the bold decision to join together, to pool their resources and to work together in ensuring that this mission and ministry in the city of Edmonton continues.

The picture on the front of the bulletin today is a picture of one of the community dinners a couple of years ago. It starts as a black and white picture depicting the past, then a monochrome picture representing the present, followed by a coloured picture depicting the future. The picture looks a bit different but the spirit of the and the subject of the picture remains the same. As we take another step into the future we do so in the footsteps of those people who have come before.

Our values have not changed, we value the beauty and tradition of worship and music and the arts, while pushing the edges of what we believe and how we live out our faith as we continue to live and others in this community and the world. How we do these things, might shift from time to time, who serves might shift from time to time, but whom we serve remains the same. When we serve the least of these we serve Jesus.

My hope and prayer is that as the body of Christ we will continue to serve as we have been called, and that we will serve with joy and generosity. I pray that we will serve out of an abundance of love, not the perfect hallmark kind of love, but the messy human kind. When we truly love, we sometimes get hurt, but when we love as Jesus does, we forgive as we have been forgiven, we show mercy and grace as we have been shown mercy and grace, we learn from our mistakes as others have learned from theirs and we grow and we build up the body of Christ in the world. So don’t stress over being perfect. Love from you heart, from your being, from your essence. Share generously with everyone you meet. When you see Jesus in every person it is going to be easy to do when you see Jesus in every person. And even though our joyfulness has been muffled by masks and feels a bit muted, the spirit is alive and well in our midst. I know that

² _____, p. 336.

³ _____, p. 335.

your spirits are screaming out, the spirit is being unleashed throughout your entire being, and that your desire to help others has not been quashed. Your desire to be with one another, to care for one another, to show one another hospitality and compassion is alive, and is at work out in the world. All you need to do is trust. Trust that everything we do no matter how big or small is important. May this last day of the year and this day of Gratitude be a time of faithful discernment in how we will continue the mission and ministry of this faith community in the world. Hold onto what we value by finding new and interesting ways to do it. God bless everyone.