

## *Embodying the care and compassion of a child.*

*Ecclesiastes 3:1-13; Matthew 25:31-46*

So, the question for us today is this, “What are we to be about?” What is our purpose as faithful followers of God? A couple of years ago I shared in one of my writings for the weekly e-news that I like to come up with a word for the year. A word that will help me to remember my purpose. A word or phrase that will act almost like a – a mantra to keep me on task. A few years ago, the word that I shared with all of you was to reframe. This was during the time of COVID and thinking about how we were all looking at screens and so you could only see a certain picture. But when you reframed in different directions and I’m tired of the distractions. I think what I would like to do is have a focus. To be focused on one thing or a single purpose. A single vision.

My cousin has a baby over a year ago, but I hadn’t actually met his child until Christmas Eve this year. This was due to COVID and various people getting sick in the family, etc. This happens to be my youngest cousin, who I in fact actually babysat when I was a teenager. I was only able to be at the family gathering for 45 minutes between the four o’clock and the seven o’clock service. And I knew that I had a lot of catching up to do so most of my conversations were very brief. But I realized a few ago that in fact I spent the most time with my youngest cousin, which I hadn’t done for quite some time, and his new baby girl. It was pretty evident that in his life his focus had changed. No longer was my youngest cousin telling me about how he’d learned guitar to find a, a girlfriend. No longer was he, you know, focused on his business and making lots of money. His entire focus was on helping his daughter stand up. Enjoying the moments when she smiled. Caring for child when she was upset. Now not being a parent myself I sometimes forget about how all-consuming having a baby is. He looked older. He looked tired, which you know delighted me in a funny little way. But what was so beautiful about it was the connection that he had with her. I can say with confidence that caring for a child, caring for an elderly parent, or a pet is truly a commitment of love. Now according to the virtues project over this past fall we’ve been looking at different values. The value that came up for me when I was thinking about this was the value of commitment. According to the virtue projects commitment is caring deeply about a person, a goal or a belief. We make promises and we keep them. We go the extra mile. We are faithful to our relationships and don’t problems to make us waver. That is what I saw in my cousin with his child. It was a commitment of love.

The passage from Ecclesiastes reminds us that throughout our life there are times when we are called to focus our attention differently. There is a time when we will laugh. There's also a time when we will cry. And at times we might do both at the same time. There's times when we work. There are times when we need to rest. There are times to tear things apart and times to sew them back together. In the church year this is the time to reaffirm our commitment to God. This is the time to start anew. To reconcile with one another. To hear the teachings of Jesus again and to deepen our understandings of what we are being called by God to do. Jesus is the word made flesh. The word of God. His birth is the time for us to accept and come to understand God's commitment to us. This is the moment when we discover we are not alone. We will never be alone again for God is with us. God has come to us, and the word made flesh – Jesus. And Jesus is the sign of God's commitment to us. God is committed to providing us with a path towards change and transformation. God is committed to bringing peace here on Earth. And God is inviting us to live life as a commitment of love.

Now the passage from Matthew, comes later in the timeline, and it really is a foreshadow of what is to come. If we start with the birth and move through Jesus' ministry, to his death, and then Resurrection. In the passage from Matthew the message is of what we will learn to do and who we are being called to be in the world. Matthew shares with us that at the end of Jesus's life on Earth – Jesus reminds us of our purpose, how we are to spend our time. From Jesus' first breath to his last into eternal life, Jesus is teaching us how to live. Jesus invites us to stay focused on what is at the heart of our faith – love. Unconditional love. Jesus invites us and says “come you that are blessed by the Creator, 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. Jesus stated when you do it to one of the least of these, you did it to me.” Matthew 25 You did it to one of the least of these. This tells me two things. Number one we need to be realistic. Remember it's only that we need to do it to one of the least of these things. So, stop feeling guilty that you can't save and help everyone. The second thing is that by saying that we also trust that others will help one. And if we all work together, then all will find and feel the love of God, will be cared for and nurtured.

Going back to the story of my cousin, babies have this way of making us focus. They demand our attention and our care. And then slowly over time they grow, and they need us in different ways. They don't demand as much of our attention and if God was being intentional by starting with Jesus as a child. Demanding the attention of the people around him to care for him. Maybe at this time of the year during the season of Christmas God is saying people I need your attention. People I need you to care for the least of these. Where is our focus? When you're sitting in the pews. When you're watching online. When you are volunteering at the church and when you are talking to another person. Where is your focus? Do you look into another human's face see the face of Jesus Christ? Is that what you focus on? When you encounter another human being who do you serve? Do you serve God? Do you serve Jesus?

John Buchanan, who's a Pastor in one of the commentaries I was reading on this passage wrote the following: he says, "God wants us, each of us. God wants to save our souls and redeem us and give us the gift of life. True, deep, authentic human life. God wants us to be saved by touching our hearts with love. God wants to save us by persuading to care and see other human beings who need us. God wants to save us from obsessing about ourselves and our own needs by persuading us to forget about ourselves and worry about others. That is God's favorite project. To teach you and me about the fundamental lesson. The secret. The truth. That to love is to live."<sup>1</sup> If we go back to Ecclesiastes and the wisdom of that particular passage keep in mind that there is a time to share our opinion and there is a time to refrain from sharing our opinion. There is a time for us to be honest and time for us to be quiet. There is a time for us to forgive and there is a time to be forgiven. I hope and pray that this year as we follow Jesus that we can stay focused on what is truly important. For I have great hope. Throughout Advent as we were filled with the hope, peace, joy, and love of God, I left feeling hope. Possibility for what God is calling all of us to do together with one another. I hope and pray that we don't get distracted in trivial things that have plagued communities of faith throughout history. Where we think and believe we know the right way of living our faith. The right way of praising God. I hope and pray that we will learn to appreciate the diversity of how people live their faith. How they speak about their faith. How they see God at work in this world. I hope and pray that we can make room for all voices to be heard in this community of faith. I hope that we can help each other focus our attention when we get off track. Commitment is caring deeply about a person, a goal, or a belief. Where we make promises, and we keep them. I guess my hope is that we can be a team. Team Jesus. I know it sounds really cheesy, even saying it sounds cheesy. [laughter] Exactly. But if we truly are a team then we remember that we are only as strong as our weakest member. That we will only become who we are called to be if we work together and listen to one another with our whole hearts and our beings. When each of us pitches in so that all the work can be done. And trusting that the people who are called to different positions are there because God has called them to do that. And each one of us has a gift that we need to share. So how is God called each of us here to care for one another? Who here is being called to be a healer, to teach, to reach out, to mentor, to serve, to speak, to pray, to sing, to create, to develop? There is no end to the gifts that God has given. There is no limit on how God calls us to serve. And there is no one way that we are called to serve. But there is a common purpose. A common way that Jesus wants us to spend our time. And when you do it to the least of these, you do it to me. May this week, this month, as we move towards the ministry of Jesus in our scriptures. May this be a time where we commit to God and to the call of discipleship again. Renew. Refocus. Reframe. Do what it is that God is calling on you to do. So are you ready to commit to serving God and one another?

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<sup>1</sup> John M. Buchanan, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 1, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p. 336.