

## *The Path of Empowerment*

*Matthew 18:21-35*

### **The Path of Empowerment**

The path of empowerment is when we see eye to eye. Looking someone in the eye connects people. They say that the eye is the window to the soul. When you look into the eyes of someone who is vulnerable, a baby, a senior, someone who is hurt, an animal in distress, the eyes indicate the need for compassion and help.

The passage today is often referred to as Matthew's depiction of the final judgement. Jesus is reminding followers that we are called not to ignore or overlook anyone, but instead we are to see the face of Jesus Christ in all people. When we do this, and serve the other as we would Jesus then we are living out the new commandment, to love one another as I have loved you. Salvation is found in our care for one another. Redemption comes through acts of service, not awards or one's station in life. I have no doubt that many people feel this sense of judgement when this scripture is read. One person this week at the Scripture Reflection Hour described it as a feeling of being called out, or exposed. I'm sure we each have stories of times when we have walked past someone who is asking for money on the streets. I'm sure we have come across someone who looks like they need help, but out of fear, or uncertainty we walked past hoping that they will get the help that they need. The reality is that we are not able to help every single person we come across. And because we have walked by does this mean that we will be punished in the end, at the final judgement?

What many of the biblical scholars point out is that Jesus's words are necessarily meant for individuals alone. We can't do this by ourselves. What Jesus is doing in this passage is encouraging us to engage in a higher calling. Elaine Pagels says Jesus' words are the basis for a radical new social structure based on the God-given dignity and value of every human being. Human beings are not to be abused and torture, not because they are wonderful – my guess is that many if not most, incarcerated people are not. They are not to be abused and humiliated and tortured

because Jesus said he is there with them: “What you do to prisoners, you do to me.” So in his name we must expect and demand more from our military leaders, our police, and our politicians: accountability and responsibility, careful supervision and high standards of conduct. “Because they do it to us” does not matter. Jesus calls us to something higher and better than that.” P. 334.

Lindsay Armstrong in one of the commentaries I was reading on this passage suggested that Matthew’s depiction of the last judgement is like a wellness check.

“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.” P. 333

When we go to the doctor for our annual check up, we are often reminded that we do not always make healthy choices. We are reminded that in order for our hearts to work to their potential, we need to eat less processed food, we need to reduce the amount of sugary foods and beverages, we need to get our hearts pumping with exercise. We need to get enough rest and water etc... This isn’t always an easy task...especially if we are dealing with stress, lack of financial support, physical pains and chronic conditions.

I found a great quote from Mother Teresa which said:

“I used to pray that God would feed the hungry or do this or that, but now I pray that God will guide me to do whatever I’m supposed to do, what I can do. I used to pray for answers, but now I’m praying for the strength. I used to believe that prayer changes things but now I know that prayer changes us and we change things.”

Isn’t this exactly what Jesus is saying to us today?

Our Spiritual Health and Wellness check is: we are reminded that in order for our spirits to work to their potential, we need to serve others. We need to love others and be kind and compassionate. We need to share what we have. We need to forgive and reconcile. Change happens when we act on our faith and when we act in love. It is the many small acts of kindness that bring about change rather than a grand gesture. It is one’s motivation for helping others that needs to change. If we only help people because we think it will get us past the final judgement, then we are missing the point. If we only help people because we hope it will make us look better in the eyes of others, then we are missing the point. If we only do help in ways that are easy and make us feel comfortable, then we are missing the point.

Some of the most powerful moments in my life are when I have been able to be present to someone in crisis, where I felt completely uncomfortable and at a loss.

In those moments I have reminded myself that God is with me, Jesus is guiding me...and the Spirit is working within me and others...and together we will do what needs to be done. When I have been hurt, when I have been lost, what has helped me the most is when someone else truly sees me, and what I'm going through. There is a moment when suddenly the burden I'm carrying is lifted! I am no longer carrying it alone. That makes the biggest difference. God wants us to live in abundance which happens when we learn to love and serve others.

John Buchanan put it this way:

“God wants to save our souls and redeem us and give us the gift of live – true, deep, authentic human life. God wants to save us by touching our hearts with love. God wants to save us by persuading us to care and see other human beings who need us. God wants to save us from obsessing about ourselves, our own needs, by persuading us to forget about ourselves and worry about others.” P. 336.

As you leave here today, go know that you are not alone, and that you have been called by God to share what you have with all people in need, AND you aren't responsible for caring for every single person in the world. When we all answer the call, all people will feel the healing power and love of God.