

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious loving God, we come to this place because we hear the call. We hear the calling of the Lord Jesus Christ, the calling to live differently in a difficult world. It calls us to a way of being that is beyond our own efforts. It calls us to faithfulness and sacrifice we cannot attain without the Holy Spirit living within us. It calls us to love in ways that are beyond our natural strength but change us and our surrounding world when we release to its power. Help us, God, to see our neighbors not for their faults, not for their obvious sins but as people to be loved with the same sacrificial love that Jesus Christ gave to us. Help us to find the faithful space of seeing them as representatives of Christ standing before us. In big and small ways, let us grow the Kingdom by seeing our neighbors as Jesus Christ while we act as the love of Jesus Christ in the world. Let us be grace as grace was given to us.

Hear our prayers, God, those we consider urgent or unworthy, those we consider of great importance and those we are afraid to share, those we have spoken before and those we have hesitated to speak. Help us to find your presence at our most prideful and our most lowly. But let us always seek you first, seeing you in those around us and those we seek to serve. We pray all these things in the Holiest of Names, Jesus Christ, as we pray as he taught us, saying in unison...

SERMON

These days, we're looking for Jesus everywhere. Unfortunately, the places we tend to see him aren't exactly the most meaningful. The stories abound. Someone saw what looked like Jesus in a piece of wood. Many more have seen Jesus in a food item. A burnt piece of toast, where the burn looks kind of like what we imagine Jesus to be. Jesus in the darkness of an overripe banana. One woman even saw the image of Jesus in the burnt part

of a pierogi, and sold it on eBay for \$1800. But what if we are looking for Jesus in the wrong place? What if Jesus is presenting himself to us in something a little more common and a little more unexpected? What would that mean for us?

This is one of the starkest stories the Lord Jesus ever told with little room for any kind of wiggle. It speaks of dividing the people at the time of judgment and the scales of judgment. When the Lord Jesus stands as judge, how does he judge the peoples? It begins with a simple idea: did the peoples treat their neighbors in need as if they were the Lord Jesus Christ? I don't know about you, but many a time, I have not. It's inconvenient; it's difficult. But I'll say the same thing I've said many a time before: the Christian life is not a sprint but a marathon. When we follow the Lord Jesus Christ, we have to foster new perspectives and realizations. One of the most important is this fact: we are called and commanded to treat "the least of these" with the same compassion and caring as we would the Lord Jesus Christ, despite any issue, like communication or convenience. It's as difficult and easy as that. It's the key to a faithful outlook on mission as it is to life in general. Let's look more deeply at this so easy but so complicated scripture passage, try to see how it works in action, and discover its effects on our lives and outlook.

This story is situated within many stories of what the Kingdom of God looks like. Right after the famous Parable of the Talents, Jesus gives us an insight into the judgment of the nations. Over sixteen verses, he says that he will separate the people like the sheep and the goats and tells us why. Jesus welcomes those he calls the sheep into the Kingdom of God, saying "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 in prison and you visited me." Of course, they are all confused; when did any of this

happen, they ask. “Whenever you did it to the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” Then he turns to those the scripture calls goats, and he calls them “accursed.” “Depart from me,” he says, and goes through the same list again. These, he said, did not give me food, something to drink, did not welcome me, did not give me clothing, or visit me in prison. When, they ask, did these things happen? Surely we would recognize the Lord Jesus at hand and work to help him! “Whenever you did not do it to the least of these,” he says, you did not do it for me.”

This is a difficult passage but easily abused. Ultimately, the focus needs to be on the criteria that Jesus used to judge the sheep and the goats: how they treated those who were in need. It is a calling to multiple things. It is a calling to humility. It is a calling to mission, to go to those who need the care the most. It is a calling to make our faith manifest in the world. There is prayer, there is bible reading and study, but there also needs to be action to make the Christian life known in the world. The hidden message is not one of works righteousness, that we can be saved by what we do. It is instead the testing of an authentic faith. The authentic faith is one that will reach out and follow the footsteps of Jesus by attending to the neighbor as if he or she was Jesus.

Here’s the key to living the entire passage: if you try to do it all by yourself, you’re gonna fall on your face. You will fail. This is not something we can choose to do and then follow through all by ourselves. It takes the active work of God in our lives in order for us to love our neighbors because it is the hardest thing we can possibly do. It’s not about whether we have faith; it’s about how we put that faith into action, and we can’t put faith into action all by ourselves. It takes the legitimate moving of God to direct us to do the most difficult. After all, there’s a lot of people you love, there’s people you want to love, and

there's people that you'd just rather not love at all. There are the people who greet you lovingly, there are the people you tolerate, and there are the people who cut you off on the Interstate. Love them anyway, as you would any representative of Jesus Christ.

With these things in mind, it has to be the heart of mission in how we go about the experience. It starts with the people you serve. As you all know, Guatemala is a Spanish-speaking country. Right off the bat, I understand that makes many people sweat with the language barrier. I took two years of Spanish in high school, and, luckily, a lot of the mechanics have stuck with me. Going to a Spanish-speaking country is a great way to stretch those muscles. While I cannot have a full-on conversation with my very limited vocabulary, I felt fortunate that I could at least express some things in Spanish to those around me. Others did not necessarily have this background, so communicating was much more difficult. What was an extra layer of complication was that many people in the village of Patulup spoke neither Spanish nor English. They spoke Quiché, a native dialect of the Mayan People. So, sometimes we needed two translators, one from English to Spanish, and another, one from Spanish to Quiché, just to communicate one little bit. We had a Spanish translator named Mario, but there was one Mario and ten of us on the mission trip.

Let's face it, communication is one of the most necessary tools to have in order to get along, and when we can't communicate we get frustrated. It's not conducive to loving one another well. Instead of finding new ways to communicate, we naturally try to speak louder and slower, when those weren't the problem in the first place. We can do a lot with facial expression and actions, but we also have to communicate with words. Many times, neither side could communicate well with the tools in the communication toolbox. When

that's the case, you have two options: you do the best you can, or you just stop trying altogether.

So what do you do? It is frustrating when you can't just talk to one another, but we tried to make the best of it we could. We actually learned some Quiché ourselves. It was just one word, but that word meant a lot in the whole communication thing. It was "utz," which means, "It's good!" You could use it as a question, a statement, or an exclamation when you got the job done and done well. Like, "utz?" "Utz." "Utz!" We had worker named Manuel who loved to make that a proclamation. No matter what, it's a matter of perspective. Is the focus Jesus Christ or is it on all the details and inconveniences in the way? When you see the other person as a representative of Jesus Christ, then the tone changes. We work together, we love one another despite the barriers standing in our way.

It wasn't just the communication issues; it was being with the same ten people for ten days. You were with the same crowd throughout issues and troubles, and, well, they started immediately. We woke up at 2:30 am, and went to DIA to get on a 6:00 am flight. At 5:00 am, they announced that our first flight was cancelled. Plane had mechanical issues; no extra plane available. Well, it was a pooper, and all of a sudden, a lot of people who were missing sleep to be at the airport were a lot of tired angry people, in our group and throughout the terminal. Everyone had travel issues, not just us. There was another mission group on our flight headed for Panama. Just for us, instead of getting to Guatemala on time, we were stuck in the Denver Airport until we could fly out at 2:30 pm. So, I stood in line with the group leadership to sort everything out. We were tired and frustrated, but it always depends on how you use it. As we looked around, there were a lot of people berating the customer service people. They were angry, which is understandable, but they

were verbally abusing those who were just trying to assist. This passage is most applicable when we are at our worst; that is when we should treat our neighbors as Christ the most.

After a couple of hours of logistics, we would miss our afternoon flight from Houston to Guatemala. Eventually, we flew to Houston and got put up overnight in a cheap hotel. We flew to Guatemala about a day after we were supposed to. Ya know what? What's the big deal? It wasn't the best thing ever, but all things considered, it worked out very well. We were healthy, we were able, and we were ready to get to work, just as smidgen behind schedule. And, of course, there was God's work ahead of us, so altogether, all was well.

But when it comes down to it, this passage is the why behind mission in the first place. You go to serve your neighbor because you love them as children of God and representatives of Jesus Christ. That's it. It's not because they are worthy. As we think about it, in spite of our unworthiness, God has loved us and given us the greatest gifts possible. What little can we do for our neighbor in return? The question then, now, and always is, "How would you treat Jesus?" What would life be like if we saw the scruffy man walking down the street as the representative of Jesus just needing some kindness? What if we saw the brash, rude coworker as the representative of Jesus needing just some affirmation of goodness? What if we treated the customer service rep of an airline that totally ruined our schedule as the representative of our Lord? "Just as you did it to one of these, you did it to me."

We know the great commandments of loving God and loving your neighbor. In this story, we have them pulled together into one idea. If we love God, we will love our neighbor as if they were Jesus Christ. There is not two commandments anymore; they are inseparable. Near and far, in regular life and in mission, the message is difficult but

integral. And we can't do it by ourselves; it requires God's Holy Spirit working in and through us. So, in the final analysis, how would you treat Jesus? Any one you see, find a faithful way to treat them that way, and the Kingdom of God comes shining through.

Thanks be to God! Amen and Amen.