

Matthew 25:31-46 Until He Comes April 9, 2006

The sermon in a sentence: Unself-conscious, practical service is a mark of the loving Christian and the loving congregation.

Why I am preaching it: To encourage the congregation in this kind of loving service.

Today we celebrate Palm Sunday. We also continue our study of service, one of the spiritual disciplines in the Richard Foster series. Just a few days before Jesus made this prophecy about the final judgment, he had ridden into Jerusalem, cheered on by adoring crowds.

Listen to Matthew 21:8-9: “A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David!’ ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!’ ‘Hosanna in the highest!’”

The people knew that he had come. They worshiped him. But they did not yet realize that this first time he came to die for their sins, and he would come a second time to judge the nations and to reign forever.

In the last days before the crucifixion, Jesus gave some of his final teaching about how citizens of the kingdom are to live until he comes again. Last fall, Pastor Wayne and I preached on the parables that Jesus taught immediately before today’s passage. In the parable of the ten virgins, those who wait expectantly are received into the wedding banquet, while those who give up are excluded. Citizens of the kingdom never give up hope that the bridegroom will return.

In the parable of the talents, those who have faith use the resources that the Master has entrusted to them to invest in the work of the kingdom, until the king comes. The one who has no faith in his master is excluded.

Today’s passage is not a parable, but description of how we are called to loving service until our king comes. In our staff meeting this week, Pastor Wayne noted how Matthew 25 covers the three fundamental building blocks of the Christian life: faith, hope, and love. This morning’s passage is about love, as expressed in service. We will look at the passage from three different angles. First, what did Jesus mean by this teaching? Second, does this passage teach that our works of compassion will get us into heaven?

And finally, we will look at some practical application for us and for our congregation.

So what did Jesus mean in this passage? It is not difficult to get at the meaning. We have here a straightforward teaching.

Jesus starts by setting the context. He is talking about the time when the Son of Man, by which he means himself, will return in glory to judge the world.

Different aspects of the Christian faith get emphasized at different periods of church history. It seems to me that our focus these days is on the present. You don't find a lot of interest in church history. Our focus is not on the past. You don't hear a whole lot of sermons on the second coming of Jesus. Our focus is not on the future. When we talk about long term planning we mean 5-10 years, not planning for eternity. Books on Christian discipleship usually emphasize our present growth as the goal, not so much being prepared for the second coming of Christ.

But in today's passage, Jesus puts our present life in the context of his return in power and glory. There is nothing here about all religious roads leading to the same place. When Jesus returns, he will come with supreme authority. He will judge every nation, and everybody in every nation. He will not judge by externals, but by what comes from the heart of each person. Jesus will judge according to the practical, ordinary compassion, or loving service, that was shown to his people, and by his people.

The King, King Jesus, blesses the sheep. He even says that his kingdom is especially prepared for them. Why? Because they fed him, they gave him something to drink, they invited him in, they clothed him, they looked after him when he was sick, and they visited him in prison. These are not just theoretical needs that Jesus pulled out of thin air. The Gospels never mention Jesus getting sick during his years on earth, but he did suffer all the rest: hunger, thirst, nakedness, loneliness, and the equivalent of imprisonment before his death. He knew what it was like to be in need.

The sheep are shocked. They have no memory at all of having served Jesus. But he responds that when they served the most insignificant of his brothers, they had served him. In the New Testament, brothers, or brothers and sisters, refers to believers. It's true that the Bible says to do good to everyone, even to our enemies who persecute us. But in this passage, Jesus is judging

according to the practical, loving compassion shown to citizens of his kingdom, to his followers.

Then the King turns to the goats. They are just as shocked as the sheep. They have no memory of refusing to serve Jesus. They probably had nothing against feeding, clothing, and visiting people. They must have fed and clothed and visited their friends and family. And they probably had nothing against God's people. Some of the goats may even have been active in church, although they were not much interested in the needs of their fellow church members. They never even bothered to notice. It may seem harsh to us that they are sent away from the presence of God. But when you think about it, where else could they go? Heaven will be filled with God's people. And who would want to spend all eternity mixing with people they were not even interested in?

So that is the meaning of the passage. Our eternal destiny depends upon our love for Jesus, shown in practical service to his people. It's pretty clear. But the meaning raises a difficulty for us. It sounds like we are saved by our good works, which brings us to our second point.

This passage seems to contradict other parts of the Bible. Jesus' words here have caused a good deal of distress to serious Christians. We are taught that we are saved by faith, and here it looks like we are saved by our good works. What's going on? It is true that we are saved by faith in Jesus. Other parts of the Bible tell us so. And if we look carefully at this passage, we will find there is no contradiction.

People who are trying to be saved by their good deeds know what good works they need to do. If they try hard enough, they will reach God's standard. The prime New Testament example is the Pharisees. They knew exactly what they needed to do to earn their salvation, and they set out to do it. But do you remember the surprise of the sheep in this passage? Earning salvation by their good works was the last thing on their minds. They didn't even know that they were serving Jesus. Because they already belonged to Jesus, loving service for his people was a natural part of who they were and what they did. This passage never commands us to care for our brothers or sisters so that we will be saved. It is simply a description of how people who have faith in Jesus will act (the sheep), and how people who do not have faith in Jesus will act (the goats).

So we have seen that Jesus teaches here that loving, compassionate service to our brothers and sisters is the way we can serve him until he returns in glory. We have seen that the application is not to work super hard caring for people so that we can earn God's favor. So we come to our third point. What is the application for us today at Makiki in 2006?

I think the application of this passage is both easier and harder than we might think at first. And it is easier for two reasons. One reason is that the examples of service that Jesus gives are not difficult. And the other reason is that this teaching is not for each of us separately, but for all of us together.

You probably noticed that the deeds Jesus mentions are not difficult or dramatic. You don't need to be rich or even especially intelligent to do them. Anybody can do them, and in fact almost everybody, Christian or non Christian, does them with their own family members. Who doesn't feed and clothe their children, or take care of grandpa when he is sick?

The sheep are not rewarded because they did any amazing acts of service. They are rewarded because they recognized that their true family was not just Mom, Dad, Uncle, Aunty, and the kids. Their compassion, their love, their simple, ordinary service extended to the larger family of God. And, without knowing it, they served Jesus himself.

Of course it is possible that our simple service will become something much more than we imagined. In several sermons I have mentioned Lillian Trasher, the woman who founded an orphanage in Egypt that has served thousands of boys and girls. But the whole thing started because she took in the baby daughter of a dying woman. God took that ordinary service and turned it into something much bigger. He calls other people to take in a baby, to raise it, but not to found an orphanage. God is free to do what he wants with our simple obedience.

Even our founding pastor, Okumura-sensei, came to Hawaii in response to a call to help out at Nu`uanu Congregational Church. An ordinary, simple act of obedience. I don't suppose he ever imagined at the time that he would end up founding a church, or that he would minister to Jesus by providing homes for numerous young men and women who needed a place to stay while they studied in Honolulu. He didn't know that he would serve Jesus by helping to found what became Kuakini Medical Center. Neither did he imagine that over fifty years after his death, his legacy would spark a mission of young

people from our church back to his hometown of Kochi. Extraordinary things may happen, but they start out with ordinary obedience.

So the service is not difficult. It is also easier than we might think because it is something we do as the people of God, not as individual Christians. The focus on us as a community makes all the difference in the world.

Did you every consider how exhausting this passage would be if we took it individually? If we watch the news we hear of famines, of natural disasters, of wars that cause great distress to our Christian brothers and sisters. We cannot meet all those needs. Even here at home, we may not be at all gifted in caring for the sick. Our living situation may not permit us to invite strangers in. But when we see this passage as a description of the whole Christian community, everything changes.

Many of you remember Harry Fujihara and Mildred Sasaki, who with others ministered to Jesus by visiting and discipling prisoners, and young people in the detention home. That was their calling. Or you may remember Sarah Sato and her co-workers in a hospital visitation ministry. As far as I know, they were not involved in prison ministry. Our congregation serves Jesus through the care of elderly people in Hope Fellowship, and the care of young children through the preschool. Central Union Church, not Makiki, is providing temporary shelter for homeless people. Jesus never meant this passage to discourage us or to overwhelm us. It is meant to encourage us, to animate us. Where does our congregation, where does our family, where does our small group, where do we fit into the wonderful, big picture of serving Jesus through compassionate care for God's people?

So that's how the passage is easier than we might think. It talks about ordinary service, and it is to be lived out by the whole Christian community. Each person, each congregation is only called to fulfill part of it.

But living out this passage is harder than we might think as well. Why? Because we might not notice when Jesus comes; and when he does come to us, it might be at an inconvenient time.

I know, because Jesus came by my office just last week, and he messed up my schedule. He knocked on my office door about 4:40 p.m. I was going to leave work just before 5:00 and go jogging. I had a commitment later on, so that was the one time I had open.

But as I said, Jesus showed up. He came in the form of a middle-aged Christian woman that I know. She is not from this church, but she happened to be on the grounds. She asked if she could use my phone. I told her yes, but that I would be leaving at 5:00. She assured me that she would be done in plenty of time.

You already know the rest of the story. She needed to make two calls, and they took longer than expected. She was dealing with an upsetting situation. After her calls she poured it all out to me, and I prayed for her. I confess that I was a little irritated with her, as by then I had missed my chance at jogging.

The funny thing is that earlier in the day I had been preparing my sermon on this very passage. You would think that I would have recognized immediately that Jesus was giving me an opportunity to minister to him through one of his humble sisters. Her needs were so simple—the use of a phone, a listening ear, and a short prayer. Easy. But I did not recognize that it was Jesus until later.

Lord, let us serve you joyously in whatever ministry you have called us to, and help us to recognize you when you show up.

Let us pray.