



“The Least of These”

a sermon by

Kathleen A. Crowe

First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, North Carolina

March 9, 2005

In our second to last week in Lent, we continue our study of spiritual disciplines with a reading from Matthew 25:31-46. This is the last of a series of six parables told by Jesus about right living and the coming of the kingdom of heaven like a thief in the night. Jesus' word to the disciples in these parables has been one of preparing themselves for meeting God in the final judgment by being mindful of their actions on earth, with this passage having a more vivid description of the end times than any writing in the New Testament outside of Revelation.

This is the final discourse of Jesus before his arrest and trial. "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, 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.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

Any preacher will tell you that choices have to be made when approaching a text for a sermon, and this one is no exception. This passage is packed with implications upon just about everything from the existence of hell to Christology to liberation theology for the poor and oppressed. Tempting though these and every topic beckoned by this text in between are, choices must be made, and so for today we will digest just a small aspect of this sweeping message.

It is a pretty simple descriptor that Matthew's Jesus lobs out in this discourse on righteous living and the kingdom of God: "The least of these." It is a humble phrase, to be sure. Not the most elaborate phrase in this text. And for us readers standing in awe and terror and wonder alongside those in this passage who find themselves at the foot of the throne of God realizing that the measure of their worth in the kingdom of God was somehow related to it, the phrase is not nearly specific enough. "The least of these." "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." Jesus intones. And silences any talk about grace or faith or election or predestination with a simple turn of a phrase. Suddenly it seems the coveted prize of salvation dangles on the tattered hem of a tossed-out garment or on a crust of bread or in a quiet visit at a bedside. And it all seems to hinge upon this phrase - 'the least of these.' When we hear these words of Jesus, if we're all being honest here, images do flash before our minds, don't they? Our imaginations supply the nouns - the least of these - tattered

clothes, haggard faces, dirt. The least of these.

I was visiting with an area nonprofit recently with a colleague of mine. Following their director to his office, we passed a homeless woman who was mentally ill. She was talking on the phone saying 'Please, you are the only one who can help me. You are the only one who can make my pain go away.' Who is she talking to? I asked. "Jesus" he responded. "Who is on the other line?" my colleague asked - "I don't know- maybe Jesus," he answered. Surely she is among the least of these, right?

A group of us just returned from a mission trip to Mexico this week where we were confronted with a brand of poverty you just don't see around here, with some restroom facilities that would make even the most bold among us blush, and Mayan families offering up their most choice space to the company of strangers - a dirt floor and a place to hang your hammock - surely they are among the least of these, wouldn't you think?

And the list goes on - all around us do we not see traces of an unspoken pecking order with the distinctions of the 'these' and the 'least of these' being drawn along the lines of the 'haves' and the 'have nots?' We spend a lot of time discerning who is the greatest among us according to the standard of the world, so surely the least should be easily identifiable.

One cannot help but recall that scuffle around the Last Supper where the disciples began to argue over who was the greatest among them. This, of course, meant that someone would have to be among the least, and none would have that. But, as Richard Foster points out, feet needed washing before the meal and no one wanted to denigrate themselves by doing the deed - that is, of course, until Jesus picked up the towel and began washing dirt-caked feet- taking on the posture of the least of these - to the astonishment, and perhaps to the horror of the disciples, saying, "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's." And with this in mind we begin to see what this text in Matthew, what this phrase 'the least of these' is really all about.

Though it would seem this message of basic humanitarian aid is simple enough - those who feed the hungry and clothe the naked receive the kingdom of heaven, there are about 36 different major scholarly interpretations on this passage - ranging from a statement about the treatment of Christian missionaries in Gentile cultures to a works/righteousness dogma - serve and be saved. The fact is, that service is not the final word on salvation. Matthew is much more interested in motivating his readers - a Gentile community - to action than he is in instilling a sense that the number of gems in your crown in heaven somehow correlates with the number of volunteer hours spent in a soup kitchen.

This is one of many discussions about the way to salvation in the gospel. But by placing service to the least of these in the context of the single criteria for salvation, Matthew elevates the laws of love and mercy as penultimate above all else, and proposes a deeper dimension to acts of compassion that goes far beyond feeling good about oneself or fulfilling a sense of obligation or even charity. Because each of the 'least of these,' whomever you understand them to be - from pauper to president - whomever has need - are no less than Christ himself insofar as the kingdom of God is concerned. Because Christ *rearranges everything* - and with towel in hand and dirty feet before him, he abolishes every pecking order and priority in the world, and we find ourselves

suddenly not judged by the measure of our success in business or our popularity, or by the number of our connections in the community, but are radically free to live according to the measure of this law of love. In fact, Matthew writes, we save ourselves from the false prophets and are saved by Christ by this law of love and compassion and vulnerability and humility to others. For it is the law of love alone - our love towards others and God's love towards us in Christ that saves us and sustains us as a community of faith. And nothing else in this world.

And if we fail to respond to the needy in body, mind, spirit, or circumstance, we fail to respond to Christ. Because this is who he is. This was how he lived and died - by not only standing in solidarity with the least of these but by becoming one such as these himself in a life and death characterized by becoming the broken, the powerless, the vulnerable, the naked, the thirsty, the imprisoned, the abandoned, and in that space, through that law of love, transforming these things to power unto freedom and salvation. So we too are called to that freedom and salvation by that very same law of love that demands our discomfort and our sacrifice, but promises spiritual riches beyond comparison that can only be attained through self-giving sacrifice for another in need.

“Come, you that are blessed by my Father, 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.” “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” Is this really so surprising when the God of Creation became a man? And the one who will return again in glory first humbled himself on a cross.

If we follow Jesus of Nazareth as our Lord and our Savior, then we are never allowed to simply sit complacently and contently in God's grace. Matthew and Jesus simply won't have it. And if we wait for Holy Week to experience the suffering of Jesus, we are mistaken and we are missing out because his suffering began long before the crowds and the cross. And we are challenged in this text to believe that his suffering extends well beyond a singular event in history but continues in lives all around us - even within us - as we all at some point or another and, like Christ, are among the least of these - still today. So that by participating in the poverty and interjecting a word of grace, we participate in the comforting of a suffering Savior, by looking with compassion into the eyes of the needy, we glimpse the face of Christ, by taking the hands of the sick we touch his wounds and offer that same healing he gave to us that only comes through entering into the depths of the human condition with all its terrifying possibilities, and by doing so redeeming it through love - not because Christ transformed hell but because he entered into it with us.

It is no wonder they call it a discipline. Practices of self-denial or sacrifice in the sanctuary alone feel holy and adventurous, but as Foster points out, footwashing banishes us to the mundane, the ordinary, and the trivial, into the messy matters of the body and heart, and spirit of friends and strangers alike, where Christ's representatives, the least of these, have no knowledge that they are such, and we, like those who ask “when Lord, did we see you naked” forget that those we reach out to are related to our redeemer and our judge. It is a discipline because it opens us to a posture before others that we spend most of our lives trying to protect ourselves against. It is a discipline because it opens us up to receiving the Word of God in ways we would

never have imagined and rarely look for. And it is an exercise in humility to realize, with the disciples, that the King of glory has already taken up the towel and done the dirty job we were all too proud or afraid to do ourselves.

You don't have to search very far to find the least of these that Matthew's Jesus speaks of. You could travel to Mexico, or visit a service site, or stroll down the street, or look in the office next to you, or perhaps even in the mirror.

But know that when you hear them calling - be it through the inclinations of the Spirit within you or by overhearing a simple phone call of a frightened woman that a greater work of the kingdom is at hand - and Jesus really is on the other end of the line. Amen.