

Sermon November 17, 2024

From Sue

My daughter's mother-in-law. Anna Butch, passed away suddenly Thursday. Please lift the Butch and Larson family in prayer tomorrow during prayers and concerns.

**WHEN I AM AMONG THE TREES** by Mary Oliver

When I am among the trees,  
especially the willows and the honey locust  
equally the beech, the oaks and the pines,  
they give off such hints of gladness.  
I would almost say that they save me, and daily.  
I am so distant from the hope of myself,  
in which I have goodness, and discernment,  
and never hurry through the world  
but walk slowly, and bow often.  
Around me the trees stir in their leaves  
and call out, "Stay awhile."  
The light flows from their branches.  
And they call again, "It's simple," they say,  
"and you too have come  
into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled  
with light, and to shine."

**Matthew 25:31-46**

'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 welcomed you, or naked 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.’

## **Restorative Justice**

“Rejoice in the Lord! Again I say rejoice... The Lord is near!” Paul’s words ring out and remind us that God is closer than we think!

Such a beautiful reminder. And the power of the promise is even greater when you remember that Paul wrote these words from a prison cell, unsure if he would ever see the light of day again... or if he would ever see the beloved people of faith who received this letter. Even in the darkest days...

especially on those days... it is important to remember that God is closer than our next breath.

And then we hear from Jesus who tells us that we might offend God whenever we serve and love those around us, especially the most vulnerable. "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." But these promises are tempered by the reminder that when we don't serve... when we don't lift up the disenfranchised, when we don't love as we have been loved, there is a consequence. It is easy to remember the people we didn't serve... the people we didn't clothe... the prisoners forgotten. We wonder, "Am I a sheep or a goat? Will I make the heavenly cut?"

But fear not because I think Jesus is pointing us towards something different. Throughout the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus reminds us that belief is not enough. At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says it is not enough to call him Lord. You must be willing to follow his teachings to be his true follower. He echoes that during the Great Commission, as he sends the disciples back out to teach others as he has commanded them.

If you think the question is Am I going to Heaven? Will I be saved? Am I a sheep or a goat? Matthew suggests that you have missed the point. So maybe the question should be not focus on *what* happens at the end of things, but more on *what am I supposed to be doing right now?* What does Jesus want me to do? To be? How will my life be different if I follow Jesus and his teachings?

How will my life be if I live it as if I really believe that Jesus really is right here with me.

Right before today's scripture, Jesus tells the parable of the Bridesmaids. He is reminding the people to be ready for the moment that we are face to face with Christ.

The fact is we are expected to get ready. We should always live our lives in a way that prepare us for that moment when we are face to face with Christ. But the person we are expecting is Jesus of Nazareth – the same one whose stories we know so well. He taught, healed, and broke bread with anyone who would join him, and he was known for his compassion toward the poor and outcast.

That's what Jesus was like in his first coming, the Incarnation.

Will he be different at the Second Coming? That's an easy question to answer, because Jesus did come back a second time: we call that "Easter." And when Jesus came among us a again, he opened the scriptures to his disciples, walked beside them on the road, and shared food with them.

And don't forget that Jesus said that where two or three are gathered in his name, he is there among them. How many times do you think that's happened over the last two millennia? Every time we pray, "thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" – that is the GOOD News for the world.

We prepare for the fulfillment of Christ's purposes on earth by doing what Jesus did. We prepare for God's kingdom by seeking it, and God's justice first. Soon we will move into Advent, that time in the church that we prepare for the coming Christ, we can live our lives, pursuing what God pursues.

How do we do that? It's all in those stories that we have inherited. It is all in our scripture today: Feed, clothe, set free... love. Or as Jesus says: "Whenever you take care of the least of these, you care for me."

Beloved, there is no better time than this to lean into these words of mission and justice! There are so many of our siblings that need us. Who are "the least of these" in our society? ONA. Immigrants, many of whom are also citizens or hold legal status, who face mass deportation... the trans youth who contemplates suicide because their family rejects them; the pregnant woman facing a health crisis in a state that turns her away; the unhoused

who simply want a warm bed and a meal to sustain them, families with small children who face losing early childhood education or support for a child with special needs. The addict that relapses and risks losing his family. The friend that faces a life-threatening health crisis.

We are called to see the Christ-light in the eyes of everyone we meet. We are called to walk with those who risk being left behind. We are called to serve the ones that others forget or harm.

Beloved, We can be the ones who bring about the fulfillment of Jesus' work in the world. It is here that faith is manifested into hope... hope for our world, hope for our communities, hope in the coming kingdom. It is here that we can join with people of faith all over the world and bring about God's Beloved Community. Every time we see Christ in the eyes of our neighbors... every time we serve them... every time we speak up for them against injustice and cruelty... every time we act in love, we are getting ready for the one who is closer than our next breath.