

The Message for April 29, 2012

Matthew 25:31-46

Out... for the World

The Rev Dr. R. K. Miller

A father took his seven-year-old son out to play golf for the very first time. They spent some time on the driving range, then the boy was ready to tackle the nine-hole golf course. The father was quite an accomplished golfer, and his son had inherited his father's competitive spirit. The boy insisted that they keep score, counting every stroke.

No matter how much the father tried to dissuade his son from keeping score on his first outing, the boy insisted. When they got home, the boy's mother asked how it went. With great pride the boy reported: "I crushed him! I had 217 and dad only had 32."

When it comes to sports, it's important to use the right scorecard. That way you know how well you are playing the game. I believe the same thing applies to the church. It's important for us to use the right scorecard...

I was wondering what "scorecard" do we use in the church? Now that might be a strange question – church isn't a game nor should we make a sport out of it – but I'm convinced we use scorecards in the church. It let's us know how we are doing – if we're "winning" or not?

I believe the scorecard we tend use in the church involves: "how many" "how often" and "how much."

How many members do we have?

How many people are in worship?

How many children or youth are involved?

How much money is in the offering plates?

How much money do we need to meet our budget?

Do we not ask these questions? Using this scorecard we focus on *more* and so we ask these questions.

Why aren't more people coming to worship especially to our traditional worship?

Why don't more people give money to support our budget?

Why don't more people come to our annual congregational meetings?

Why aren't more people involved in this ministry or that ministry?

That's not a bad scorecard. There is always room for more. More, lets us know how we are doing. But maybe that's not the kind of game we are called to play.

Another scorecard we tend to use in the church is that of *comparison*. It's natural and normal for us to compare ourselves to one another. It's normal and natural to compare ourselves to other churches. But Jesus doesn't call us to be normal or to do

what comes natural. He calls us to be weird. There is no need to use the comparison scorecard but we do.

Often someone will come up to me and say, “You know pastor, church so and so is doing this or that and they get this many people out for it and they make this much money on it. We should do something like that?” That’s using the more and the comparison scorecard.

Our national church uses this same scorecard. Every year we file an annual report, and guess what they want to know? “How many,” “how often” and “how much.”

The other week I found myself using the more and the comparison scorecard. I was at a meeting with Lutheran colleagues and we were comparing notes about how we are doing. Someone said – “You know the latest statistics suggest -- that if we continue the way we are going and nothing changes, the ELCA will cease to exist somewhere around the year 2027. If not then, certainly by the year 2035.” I stopped comparing and started considering. That’s 15 to 23 years from now. I don’t know about you but perhaps it’s time we consider a different scorecard.

That statement about the future of the ELCA troubles me. I went on line and looked up the statistics of the Lutheran churches in our area. I found myself using the more and the comparison scorecard. We are the only Lutheran church in the Lebanon area that is offering an ongoing contemporary and traditional worship and we are the only church averaging over 200 in Sunday morning worship attendance and we send the most money to the ELCA.

I guess we could say that we are winning the game here at Friedens. We’re in first place in our division, and of course everybody loves a winner... unless it’s the Yankees or the Red Sox.

There’s nothing wrong with wanting to see more people involved in the life of this congregation. There is nothing wrong with wanting to grow bigger. But I have come to realize that *quality* is more important than *quantity*. And the quality I am talking about here is the *quality of our faithfulness to Jesus* and his mission in the world.

If the needs of the church becomes our deepest yearning, our principle goal, our core driver, then we’re missing the point. We’ll make decisions and focus our time and attention on the wrong things. I’m pretty sure that God isn’t terribly interested in or impressed with us being “first” or “the biggest” or having “more” or playing the “comparison” game. I believe God’s primary scorecard involves us being *better* – better at being faithful to Jesus and his mission in the world.

In our reading in Matthew’s Gospel we heard the parable of the sheep and the goats and we find Jesus using a different scorecard. It’s a scorecard that has eternal consequences. It’s a world mission in and through the church. Jesus saves us – the church can’t save us. So we live for Jesus in and through the church.

In this parable, Jesus offers us a different scorecard for our lives, and our lives together in the church. Jesus' scorecard looks something like this:

1. How many people are we setting free from oppression?
2. How many hungry people are we feeding?
3. How many homeless people are we sheltering?
4. How many thirsty people have we provided clean drinking water for?
5. How many strangers have we welcomed?
6. How many people have we provided clothes for?
7. How many sick people have we cared for?
8. How many lonely or imprisoned people have we visited?

We could add other issues of justice to this list. According to Jesus, God judges the success of our lives (individually and corporately) by these things.

Notice how different this scorecard is. We measure success in the church by internal things -- how many people were in worship and how much money was in the offering plate... I need to be honest I find myself using that scorecard too.

But today I find myself at a different place. Jesus is telling us that God measures our success and our effectiveness in the church by the outward things. By what we do out in the world. God, it seems, is more interested in the impact we make outside the church than we do inside the church.

Jesus is calling us to **rethink church** not with a maintenance mindset but with a mission mindset. I continue to rethink church every day and what Jesus expects from me as a pastor and from us as a congregation. Jesus is challenging us to consider doing church in the way this video suggests. Check it out...

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XBJdlumfRME&feature=related>

Maybe you don't want to rethink church. That's okay. Maybe you're having a tough time rethinking church and accepting what this video is telling us. That's okay. I can appreciate your struggle. But I'm convinced that we need to rethink church for the sake of our relationship with Jesus and his mission in the world.

The past five or six years the Spirit has been compelling me, your pastor, to rethink church. That's why I do what I do. If we can't continue to do business as usual. If we do, the ELCA will cease to be in 15 to 25 years.

Author Reggie McNeal has a passion for seeing the Spirit's movement in and through the church today. He believes that God is calling the church to develop a different scorecard – not for church maintenance but for church mission.

When I started reading his book *Missional Renaissance* I had a hard time understanding what he was saying. By the time I finished reading it I saw the church and

my part in it in a new way. Now I use a different scorecard. He has helped me rethink church. Reggie says that since the world has changed and continues to change that means the game for the church has change. He suggests we change the scorecard in three ways:

1. From an internal to an external ministry focus.
2. From program development to people development in terms of core activities.
3. From a church based to kingdom based leadership agenda.

1. The church is the only organization that exists for those who are not yet part of it. In the church we are blessed to be a blessing to others. That's what Jesus is telling us in the sheep and goat parable. Jesus is saying that the church doesn't have a mission – we are on God's mission in the world.

We have a mission team that travels to help people. If you can't go to Bloomsburg to help out this year then pray for this team and offer resources to help support this ministry of Friedens. We also have a local mission opportunity every Third Saturday here in town at the Bahney House. Our LIFE Groups include an outreach mission component to them. This is where we put our faith into action. Every week I design our worship with our guests in mind.

This may seem weird and not normal but when we focus on the needs of those outside the church, the needs of the church get met. That's what Jesus is saying. How might we move from internal to external ministry focus?

2. Jesus is all about developing people not programs. We are in the people development business not the program business. Participation in a church program doesn't necessarily mean personal growth. So Jesus calls us to create an environment where people are developed and grow in a deeper commitment to him. A church where people claim responsibility for their own faith development and are supported with the grace and love of God in this place.

This may seem weird and not normal to help people commit to Christ instead of the church. And yet that is what Jesus is calling us to do. How might we move away from developing programs to developing people?

3. I believe the church exists for the kingdom, not the kingdom for the church. I believe it's not about running the church but about extending God's love and grace and mercy and forgiveness out into a hurting and hostile world.

This may seem weird and not normal but Jesus is calling us to make it about him and his kingdom and not us and our church. How might we move from church based agenda to kingdom based agenda?

Jesus has given us a scorecard that measures the quality of our faithfulness to him and his mission in the world. That might make us a bigger church or it might not. But it will certainly lead us in faith, hope, and love. Will you? Will you live your life for him out in the world? Amen.