

**THE MESSAGE****June 27, 2010****Matthew 25:31-46****The Rev. Dr. R. K. Miller*****Family Matters***

Story: I read this story on the internet and I just had to share it with you this morning, Author Unknown.

*I was parked in front of the mall wiping off my car. I had just come from the car wash and was waiting for my wife to get out of work. Coming my way from across the parking lot was what society would consider a bum. From the looks of him, he had no car, no home, no clean clothes, and no money. There are times when you feel generous but there are other times that you just don't want to be bothered. This was one of those "don't want to be bothered times."*

*"I hope he doesn't ask me for any money," I thought. He didn't. He came and sat on the curb in front of the bus stop but he didn't look like he could have enough money to even ride the bus. After a few minutes he spoke.*

*"That's a very pretty car," he said. He was ragged but he had an air of dignity around him. His scraggly blond beard kept more than his face warm. I said, "Thanks," and continued wiping off my car.*

*He sat there quietly as I worked. The expected plea for money never came. As the silence between us widened something inside me said, "Ask him if he needs any help." I was sure that he would say "yes" but I held true to the inner voice.*

*"Do you need any help?" I asked. He answered in three simple but profound words that I shall never forget. We often look for wisdom in great men and women. We expect it from those of higher learning and accomplishments. I expected nothing but an outstretched grimy hand. He spoke the three words that shook me.*

*"Don't we all?" he said.*

*I was feeling high and mighty, successful and important, above a bum in the street, until those three words hit me like a ton of bricks. Don't we all?*

*I needed help. Maybe not for bus fare or a place to sleep, but I needed help. I reached in my wallet and gave him not only enough for bus fare, but enough to get a warm meal and shelter for the day.*

*Those three little words still ring true. No matter how much you have, no matter how much you have accomplished, you need help too. No matter how little you have, no matter how loaded you are with problems, even without money or a place to sleep, you can give help.*

*Even if it's just a compliment, you can give that. You never know when you may see someone that appears to have it all. They are waiting on you to give them what they don't have. A different perspective on life, a glimpse at something beautiful, a respite from daily chaos that only you through a torn world can see.*

*Maybe the man was just a homeless stranger wandering the streets. Maybe he was more than that. Maybe he was sent by a power that is great and wise, to minister to a soul too comfortable in themselves. Maybe God looked down, called an Angel, dressed him like a bum, then said, "go minister to that man cleaning the car, that man needs help." Don't we all? (from [http://www.indianchild.com/inspiring\\_stories.htm](http://www.indianchild.com/inspiring_stories.htm))*

Jesus tells a similar yet different kind of story, a powerful yet thought-provoking story about the Kingdom of God. Jesus came to bring the good news about the kingdom saying, "Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand" and he told stories to reveal that kingdom. Jesus says that, by his coming into the world, a whole new reality, a radically new kind of Kingdom has arrived. **A new way of looking at life and the people we share it with right now.** Jesus invites all people to live and see one another as citizens of God's Kingdom on earth. It's a human family matter and the human family matters.

Jesus tells a story about sheep and the goats. Now I believe many people tend to misread and misunderstand Jesus' meaning in this story. I've heard many Christians think this parable says something like this: "In the end times, when Jesus returns to judge all people, he's going to gather everyone together and then he's going to sort them. All the people (the sheep) who believe Jesus died on the cross for their sins he will put on one side, and they will go to heaven. And then all the people (the goats) who don't believe that Jesus died on the cross for their sins he will put on the other side, and send them all to hell."

But what if that is not what this story is all about. After all Jesus is telling this story before he died. What if this is a final exam story. To get us ready for our ultimate final exam by the way we live right now. I believe this story is about how we are to live our lives everyday.

I'm reading a book on leadership by Ken Blanchard. He was a college professor and always in trouble with the school faculty. He would give out the final exam on the first day of class. His reasoning was that not only was he going to give the exam questions to the students but he was going to spend the rest of the semester teaching them the answers because life is all about getting A's not some normal distribution curve. (From "*The Servant Leader*" by Ken Blanchard and Phil Hodges.)

I believe the story told by Jesus is to prepare us for the ultimate final exam when we meet our maker on the last day. Two questions we will need to answer on that day are:

- 1) **What did you do with Jesus?**
- 2) **What did you do with all the resources God has given you?**

I see this is a final exam story -- a story inviting us to value life and the people in it for as long as we live. Here's the thing, we ultimately don't know who are the "goats" and who are the "sheep." That's not our job. That's for the shepherd to decide. Not us.

As soon as we identify someone as a "goat" because of his or her lifestyle, as soon as we believe that we are his "sheep" because we come to church or because we do this or that, then we just become a goat. We've just done what Jesus tells us not to do. Judge not lest you be judged. Sometimes we are sheep and sometimes we are goats and we never know if we are the one or the other.

Jesus is teaching us some key values to live by here. I suggest three of them for you to consider:

**First**, the value of **selfless living**. Life in God's family is a matter of giving one's self away in service to others. It is not what can I get? But what can I give? Washing feet... Seeking to serve not to be served... Giving your life away for the sake of others... These are all things that matter to Jesus. And they matter to us too.

It's no wonder Jesus' good news begins with a command to repent! Don't we all need to? The word "repent" means to change one's mind or direction. Living into this Kingdom will require us to do both. Living into this Kingdom of God's family calls us to change our way of thinking and our way of behaving. It calls us to swim against the tide of me-ism culture and against our natural self-centeredness.

In the parable of the sheep and the goats, the ones whom Jesus blesses and affirms are those who seemed to naturally put the needs of others before their own, turning their attention inside out, feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, caring for the sick, visiting the prisoner, welcoming the stranger. This is the value of selfless living.

**Second**, the value of **"the least of these."** Life in the Kingdom – in God's family – puts a priority on those who are weak, lost, poor, disenfranchised, oppressed, and discarded.

These are the very people with whom the King identifies. Jesus says, "Whatever you did for the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you've done to me." Jesus values the meek and the weak, and so too do those who live into this new Kingdom reality by believing and behaving differently...

**Third**, the value of **discipleship in daily life**. Life in the Kingdom puts a priority on living our faith every moment of every day. It's about preparing for the ultimate final exam.

In the parable we get a sense that feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, giving a drink to the thirsty and visiting the prisoner are just the way life is. These are not things we do in addition to daily life; these things *are* daily life. There is no sense of fulfilling one's religious duty and then getting on with real life. This *is* real life.

**Selfless living, the least of these, and discipleship in daily life.** These are the values that Jesus teaches for living the faith.

**Two Questions:**

1. How would your life be different if you lived by these values?
2. How would Friedens be a different place if we lived these values?

A week or so ago I was talking with one of dedicated members here at Friedens. He said, “You know pastor, I’m a stubborn Dutchman. I have lived here in Myerstown all my life. I listen to your sermons and if we just did what you tell us to do in your sermons, we could make this world a better place.” I said, “You mean people aren’t?” I’m kidding, I didn’t say that to him. But I did thank him. Because that is the greatest compliment someone could give me.

With that in mind if we are going to live by the values that Jesus is talking about then we need to remember these four things...

First, **this Kingdom – God’s family is for everyone.** All are welcome.

Second, **this Kingdom – is mysterious.** And it is not always what it seems. Everyone is surprised by Jesus and his teachings.

Third, **this Kingdom is here and now, not just some future reality.** We are to be accountable to a Jesus’ lifestyle right now.

Fourth, **we live by a faith, not fear.** It takes faith to believe what we believe.

It takes faith to believe that forgiveness really is better than bitterness, that love really is better than hate, that generosity really is better than accumulation, that serving really is better than being served, that compassion really is better than indifference.

It’s all about sharing God’s radical love with others in radical ways. God’s love surprises us.

This past week I was working on this sermon in my office. I came outside to wait for Todd. It was the day that wind storm blew through and blew down one of the trees down by the pavilion. So I walked outside to wait for him. I was standing on the corner watching the cars zoom by and people walking here and there. A young man came walking up the street and started to cross over Washington Ave. He waved to me and I waved back. Then he stopped, turned around, and crossed over Locust street towards me. Jesus’ words ran through my mind, “what you have done for the least of these you have done it to me.” He asked me if I have anything to do with this church (pointing to the building). I said, “yes.” He then told me he needed a ride to a friend’s house over by the Turnpike. He just has a fight with his girlfriend and she kicked him out. I asked if there were any children involved. He said yes, he has a four month old with her, another

child with a different woman, and another child with yet a third woman. I won't tell you exactly what I said but I encouraged him to change his ways. He said, "Yeah, I know..." He had a tattoo of a marijuana plant on his arm and some strange bird tattooed on his neck. His head was shaved and he had a thin beard. He was a rough looking guy.

Now... I don't advise doing this... But as we talked for awhile and before I knew it I said, "Come on. I'll give you a ride." As we went to get into my SUV he told be he had done some time in jail, for stealing. Okay I thought... As we drove he told me about his life. His mom abandoned him when he was 6 months old. His maternal grandparents raised him. His step-grandfather molested him. His mother died at 36 from AIDS. His father was never in his life. He wrote a Christian Rap Song and shared it with me. It was pretty good. He very much believes in Jesus. I dropped him off and as I drove back to the church I thought, "I just gave Jesus a ride." That's the kind of people Jesus would hangout with. And it's the kind of people we are to hang out with.

We are to share God's radical love in this place and out there in the world in surprising ways. So I brought with me a beach ball. On the outside I'm going to write "God's Love" on it. I have a pen here somewhere... This beach ball represents God's love. Now, I can play with this beach ball by myself. Keeping God's love to myself, (I started hitting it up in the air and catching) having fun with God's love by myself. BUT it's a lot more fun to share God's love with others. So... let's share God's love. (I hit the beach ball out into the congregation and they hit it around the room) Let's pass God's love around. (It made its way around the room). (When it fell to an open area with no one sitting there I said,) That's a good place to leave God's love for now.

God's love is radical and we are to share that love in this place and in the world with people in need. So keep this in mind. Jesus said, "Truly I tell you – just as you have done it to the least of these my brothers and sisters you have done it to me." Amen.