First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

11/26/23

The Least of These

Matthew 25:31-46 (NRSVUE)

**31**“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. **32**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, **33**and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. **34**Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, **35**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, **36**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.’ **37**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? **38**And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you or naked and gave you clothing? **39**And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ **40**And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.’ **41**Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You who are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels, **42**for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, **43**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.’ **44**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?’ **45**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.’ **46**And these will go away into eternal punishment but the righteous into eternal life.”

My preaching professor had one cardinal rule, which she drilled into our heads, when it came to how preachers of the gospel should approach scripture. Preachers, in her view, should always read the Bible with one hand and the New York Times with the other hand. The point she was making was simple; as preachers, we need to know what was going on in the world and be willing to apply the lessons of scripture to our modern, everyday lives.

The best way to do that, she told us, was to come down from our ivory towers and engage with what is going on in the world around us. Being in the world, but not of the world, simply wasn’t an option, in her view. Now, this can cause problems in a congregation if some feel that the sermon is “too political,” and, in all fairness, there are preachers who use their pulpits to score political points without tying their words firmly to the teachings of Jesus.

One of the reasons I tend to shy away from sermons that might be considered “political,” is my awareness of the fact that some of you hold views that are more conservative than my own. And, I should note, that’s perfectly fine. This understanding has caused me to often preach in broad general terms, without saying things that could cause a rift, or give offense. Today, however, I’m going to follow the advice I gave y’all in last week’s sermon, and I’m going to take a risk.

As I was working with this very familiar passage, I couldn’t help but draw a comparison between Jesus’ words, so aptly captured by the writer of Matthew’s gospel, and the war in Gaza. As we all know, the attacks of October 7, left 1,200 Israeli men, women and children dead with another 240 people kidnapped and taken hostage. Before I go on, let me say that I firmly believe in Israel’s right to exist and defend itself. What occurred that day was horrific and shocking and I believe that Israel had to respond. I pray every single day for an end to the war, and pray too, for a just and equitable long-term solution to an issue that has plagued the Middle East for generations.

That said, since October 7, more than 14,800 Palestinians, including 6,150 children, have been killed in Gaza, by Israeli troops, and more than 1 million people, out of a population of just over 2 million residents of the Gaza Strip, have been forced from their homes. While the Christian community in Gaza only numbers about 1,000 people, the issues facing all the residents of Gaza, Islamic and Christian alike, transcend sectarian beliefs and Jesus’ words apply equally to all involved.

The key verse in today’s passage is found in verse 40, where in response to the question of when did his listeners see Jesus hungry, naked, thirsty or homeless, Jesus replies, *‘…Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.’* These words are so important, in fact, that Jesus drives the point home by repeating them in verse 45. And, to be clear, there is absolutely no wiggle room in the message Jesus is conveying here.

If we step back and take a broader view of the horrific nature of the Israeli Hamas conflict, we see that neither side is without blame and neither the Jewish people of Israel nor the Islamic people of the Gaza Strip have lived up to what their own sacred texts have to say about the treatment of others.

What we refer to as the Golden Rule, *“Do unto others as you would have them do to you,”* has scriptural basis in not only the New Testament, but in the Torah and the Koran, as well. In Matthew 7:12, we read, *“In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.”*  In the Torah, it is written that, *“What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. This is the whole Torah; all the rest is commentary. Go and learn it,”* while the Koran tells us that, *“Not one of you truly believes until you wish for others what you wish for yourself.”*

Unfortunately*,* what many people have seen in both the initial attack on Israel by Hamas, as well as Israel’s reaction, is the blatant hypocrisy; the enormous gap, between the very clear instructions that both Judaism and Islam give to their followers regarding how people should be treated, and how those commandments are to be lived out. And using today’s reading as a benchmark, I fail to see how the actions taken by both sides in this war constitute caring for the least among us.

Before we pat ourselves on the back and congratulate each other, saying we Christians would never act with such blatant disregard for our sisters and brothers, consider this: how many times have we ignored a homeless person on the street who is begging for spare change, in order to simply get something to eat? How many times have we opposed the creation of low-income housing in our neighborhoods out of fear that it will lower our own property values? How many times have we acted, at best, with indifference towards those who don’t have the resources to properly clothe house, or feed themselves and their families? How many times have we refused to visit those who are in prison, saying to ourselves, “Well, I’m not going to waste my time visiting someone who probably deserves to be incarcerated?”

While the Israeli Hamas war can be seen as an extreme example of religious hypocrisy, we Christians are certainly not exempt from the sin of hypocrisy regarding our own actions or inactions, when it comes to how we treat the least of these. It may be easy to shrug off the sacred writings of other faith traditions, saying we’re not Jewish or Islamic, so those words, which mirror the words of Jesus, shouldn’t apply to us. But it should not be easy to shrug off Jesus’ very clear commandment to each and every one of us, when it comes to how we should treat the least of these.

It is very important for us to continue to pray for an end to the violence in the Middle East. And at the same time, it is equally important for us to continue to pray for an end to hunger, homelessness and poverty in our own country. But here’s the thing; while prayers are vital to the work of ending the injustice of poverty, homelessness and hunger, in our own country and the world, prayers are simply not enough. We need to be willing to put those prayers into action or they become, in the words found in one of our favorite hymns, “As sounding brass, and hopeless gain.”

Folks, we are not called to sit on the sidelines, ignoring the thorny issues of poverty, homelessness and hunger. We can’t assume that someone else will step up to resolve the issues facing our nation and our world. Thoughts and prayers cannot and must not be the sum total of our actions. We are called to lift up the least of these in our communities and in our world. If we are to be true to our faith; if we are to be true to the gospel of Jesus Christ, we must put our belief in the gospel into action. If not us, who? If not now, when?

**AMEN**