

Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

November 25, 2018

Matthew 25:31-46

Luke 10:25-37

I spent several hours on Thanksgiving Day, trapped in a room with a bunch of bums. They were dirty and smelly and they just sat there, some even slept...and snored. When a volunteer brought fried chicken, they tore into it like ravening dogs. I just don't know about people anymore, especially "those people."

Have you ever heard anything like that before?

Well, that's not exactly where I was. I was in a room, as part of our Safe Space Drop-in Center, with people who know they have been labeled in hurtful and lasting ways. I was in a room with our neighbors; without homes, often tired, hungry & not so clean. The labels they wear hide their stories, their needs and their humanity.

A young man who hasn't seen his mother, who lives locally, in three years; or the guy who sits on the floor, writing notes to God and Capt. Christ; or one who asked for a broom to sweep up the cigarette butts left on our front sidewalk, or the grizzled old guy who teaches chess to children.

These are our neighbors, and you know all of this, because you have been part of this ministry since the Homeless coalition began in 2010. You host the shelter and provide evening meals and I am happy to be here this morning to personally thank you for that partnership and your support for Community Ministries over a lot of years.

I am also happy to talk about Community Ministries and, *church*; church as the institution and occasionally, a specific local congregation. I rarely think of one, without the other.

Most of my talking about this ministry has focused on, "who we are, and "what we do. "Who we are?" can be summed up by our first "guiding principle," which is, very simply, "everyone is received with unconditional acceptance, just as they are."

This is not to say that all behaviors will be accepted; bad behaviors will be asked to leave, while the individual will be welcomed back in, for a second chance, or third chance, or as many as it takes.

Several years ago, in the middle of a winter night, a young man came into our building through a shattered front window. By the time I got there, he was in custody and on his way to jail. His first stop, months later when he got out, was to apologize. He moved out of the area for a couple of years, and is now back, still struggling, and still welcome.

Unconditional acceptance.

You know much of what we do: we are the agent of 45 county churches who do emergency assistance & help folks transition into greater self-sufficiency. We have a variety of important partnerships that help with health, employment and general support. I would be happy to talk more about all of this.

The "who," and "what" are clearly important, but now, it seems to me that the critical question is, "WHY?" Why... do we do, what we do?

Why does Community Ministries exist? Indeed, why does *church* exist; why does this church exist?

Community Ministries hasn't been around as long as *church* has, only since 1983; but we were founded by *church* and are supported by *church*. And, because we are younger than *church*, we are closer to our foundational documents, to the "why" of our existence.

Our vision statement says that we were motivated by a biblical imperative. But, what was that? I wanted something very specific. So, I cheated. I used a scripture reference that I had used before.

In the early 90s when I was serving in Southern Maryland, I, and four clergy colleagues, from 8 congregations, 3 denominations and 2 races, founded a community ministry called SMILE—Service Makes Individual Lives Exciting. We five clergy were called the five smirks. A fun name, but a most serious endeavor. The biblical imperative, for SMILE, was without question, Matthew 25:31-46.

You heard it: Jesus, the King, looking out over the nations, separating the sheep from the goats.

He said to the sheep, “You will inherit the Kingdom; you gave me food and water when I hungered and thirsted; you welcomed me even though I was a stranger and clothed me when I was naked; you took care of me when I was sick and came into prison to visit me. You saw me and helped.

He told the goats, “You will go into the eternal fire;” you ignored me.

Both sheep and goats wondered when they had seen him, and he said, “Whenever, you see the least of these members of my family, you see me.”

It seemed to us, in Southern Maryland, that this was the measure of our lives: did we see Jesus in the need that existed all around us; did we see Jesus in the faces of those who carried those needs and wore those labels; did we see them as members of our own family; or did we not? That is what motivated us, and a ministry that continues strong to this day.

We are all members of this family that strives to pay attention to Jesus and what he says. And, we come into this space to hear what Jesus says and carry the effects of his words back out into the world where the measure of our lives may be whether, or not, we see Jesus in the faces of need.

We are members of the same family and we are also neighbors. In Luke (10: 25-37) we meet a traveler from Samaria who came across a man from Jerusalem who had been robbed, beaten and left on the side of the road to die. Before the Samaritan got anywhere close to the injured man, two representatives of *church*—a priest and a levite—had already passed on by.

You will recall that, in those days, the Jews and Samaritans were not on good terms, yet this traveler from Samaria did not let that difference get in the way of doing what he knew he needed to do.

He stopped and helped.

Jesus is telling us that this is what neighbors are called to do, and that we are all neighbors; neighbors in a way that transcends political or theological differences—indeed any differences at all.

Years ago, in my first year of seminary, I was at a meeting of my local church’s council on ministries, a meeting that spent a full 45 minutes talking about who failed to turn off the coffee pot after the Sunday service. At one point, one of the pastors nudged me and whispered, “This, is what the church is really all about.”

Really?

This was a church where I accepted my call to ordained ministry, so I have special memories. I also remember that it didn’t do much outreach, and that it did have lots of committees; at least one that worried about coffee pots.

But, you know, I don’t remember Jesus ever saying, “Go, and make committees.”

What Jesus did say was, “go, pay attention to the needs all around you, stop your self-focused actions, and help.” What Jesus said was, “go, get your hands dirty with the blood and muck as you bind up the wounds of your neighbors; “as you embrace those who are different, lost or overlooked; those, who are the least among us and members of our family.

Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest and the founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation wrote, “If *church* was really practicing the gospel, there wouldn’t be any one in the pews.”

We would be somewhere out there, doing the hard and messy work with the throw-aways of our society; we would be listening to the stories of years of neglect and abuse, and the consequences of unhappy decisions; we would be where they are; sharing their pain, isolation and hopelessness.

Greg Boyle, a Jesuit priest who has worked with gangs in Los Angeles for 25 or more years calls us to a radical kinship. In his book, “Barking to the Choir,” he says, radical kinship means sharing our lives with those we serve and that is exactly where we are to be, if we are to offer hope.

Jesus did not say to make committees, yet we have just established a standing financial development committee. We must deal with the important issue of creating a solid financial base that will support a ministry facing growing needs.

And, just like *church*, we need to make sure that the coffee pot has been turned off and learn how to use our organizational structure to support what we do. But it is imperative that this committee remains only a means to an end, and not the end itself.

Will our structure ever become a barrier between ourselves and our neighbors?

Probably not, because they come to us. Each, and every day of the week, we welcome our troubled neighbors, who are experiencing troubled times.

Perhaps, *church* has become isolated. While some will come into *church* office, it seems that many more won’t come into sanctuary. I wonder if this is something that we ought to be thinking about?

I am happy drawing our biblical imperative from either, or both, of these powerful scripture passages. What they say, I think, is that we must be involved in the messy stuff of life.

Having a clear understanding of WHY we do what we do keeps us grounded in a higher reality. It keeps us honest. It keeps us from doing something just because it looks good on a resume, or so that we might be noticed by someone important. It prevents us from serving others from an assumed position of privilege or superiority and frees us to serve out of that radical kinship.

This, I believe: if we lose sight of the “why” of what we do, **we have no business doing what we do**; no business being JCCM. Or, for that matter, calling ourselves the Church of Jesus Christ.

But there is good news. The good news is that God also has guiding principles. And, I suspect that the first principle might just be, that we are all received with unconditional acceptance, just as we are.

And, that is, indeed, good news.

Thanks be to God. Amen.