

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

22nd Sunday after Pentecost

Duane M. Harris

November 9, 2014

Text: Matthew 25:35-46

Title: “Outside My Own Little World: I Don’t Want to Miss What Matters”

(Show video clip about speaker playing Monopoly with his grandmother and learning that though he can win by being ruthless, in the end “...it all goes back in the box”.)

There are those moments of clarity aren’t there when we ask that question. What really matters? Or maybe they are moments when we’re not clear at all. Maybe they are moments when uncertainty knocks us off our feet and that question comes because we really don’t know. What matters?

Some of you remember about this time of year 15 years ago when Y2K was headline news. The turn of another century was coming and there were all sorts of predictions in the air, including some who said the world would end and some Christians were among that number. The thing that struck me most about all the hype was the way many people responded to that question “what matters”.

Cummins Interstate Power Co. in Columbus, Ohio makes electric generators. Back in January 1999 they began seeing increases in sales. In June they already had a backlog of several months, which they expected would only get worse. Eli Lilly & Co. had been worried about hoarding of insulin by diabetics and began preparing to boost its supply by 50%. Food distributors began to add five days to their normal 60-day supply of nonperishable foods. Bergen Brunswig Corp., a drug wholesaler, planned to add 21 days to its inventory of drugs in addition to its normal 30-day supply. They checked supplies sent to hospitals and drug stores to deter hoarding of drug supplies. The company’s vice-president of procurement was quoted as saying, “We can’t have 100% of our inventory end up in the hands of 10% of our customers.”

So much of the Y2K drama was focused on self-preservation. What matters, especially when people are scared? Make sure I have enough, never mind my brothers and sisters. At least that’s the way some people answered the question.

Yet, the answer to that question is quite different when listening to Jesus in the Gospel According to Matthew. Here, we have this scene of separation: goats on the king’s left—that would be you people over there, and the sheep on the right—that would be all of you. Now, if you’re on the king’s right you’re good to go, and this story told by Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel isn’t quite as troubling, but you goats, well, that’s another story isn’t it? As long as I read this story and see myself as belonging to the sheep, I’m comfortable. I’m good. I’m happy. But before I get too secure and arrogant, I remember that for certain there have been times I’ve been

a goat. I've missed opportunities to care for the vulnerable. I don't have a perfect track record, so I've been a goat, too, with you people over there. When I recognize that, I'm not so happy, not so comfortable. No one wants to be condemned by the king.

Yet, even that response reveals an answer to the "what matters" question that is entirely self-focused. What matters is that I get the eternal reward. As long as I get that reward that's all that really matters.

But Jesus doesn't seem to be affirming that in this story of the king. We have two groups of people. One group has lived life responding to vulnerability by thoughtlessly offering what was needed. If someone was in need of clothing, they gave it. Coats for kids! If someone needed a drink, they were the first to provide a glass of cold water. If hunger was a problem, they stepped up and gave generously to meet the need. Food pantry! If someone was thrown in prison, they went to visit regardless of the guilt or innocence of the imprisoned. If sickness knocked someone off their feet: again, they visited. This group of people responded to human need by living their lives and giving of themselves generously and without thought. Even when the king points out their behaviors, they don't remember having done it. Nevertheless, the king proclaims,

"When you've done it to the least of these who are members of my family, you have done it to me."

The gospel makes it clear that Jesus is present in vulnerability whether or not the person's condition was brought upon them by their own action. Jesus never mentions blame, just the conditions: hungry, sick, naked, imprisoned, a stranger. Vulnerability.

Fifteen years ago my father had been wheeled into the operating room at St. Luke's Hospital in Saginaw—it was still St. Luke's back then. A triple by-pass. For some reason, this passage struck me differently that day: "I was sick. . . I was naked." Our family had gathered around him outside the operating room doors to pray for him as he lay on the stretcher, heavily sedated. Hospital gown: basically means you're naked. There are few moments in one's life of such high vulnerability as when going through surgery. And I'm not speaking only of the patient, but also the patient's family. You have no control. Totally helpless.

While there were more than two or three gathered there, Christ was present in family and good friends who came to visit and to pray with one who was sick. Christ was present in the prayers of others, in notes of concern, in phone calls and visitation. Those kinds of experiences reinforce the fact that there is no need to wait to know the saving presence of Christ. We only need to pay attention, watch, and listen, because Jesus is already present.

I've been thinking a lot about vulnerability.

-An infant totally dependent upon someone else in order to survive.

-A man I saw last week on my way to the hospital. Worn, dirty coat. Uncut and unkempt dark hair. Bushy beard. Large irregular holes in his pants, not the kind some people pay for. Eyes fixed on the street, never looked up. Carrying an old grocery bag. I wondered if all his belongings were in that bag.

-A mother, grandmother and great-grandmother in a nursing home. Doesn't know where she lives or even her name anymore. Even has to be fed now.

People in vulnerable situations. The least of these. Jesus is in them and in us when we are vulnerable. That's what I hear from scripture this morning. Whenever people are exposed in some way, look for Christ. Whenever you are in situations in which you suffer a lack of basic needs, watch for Christ. Whenever you come upon someone who is in need, care for Christ in that one.

And then there are the goats. They aren't aware of their behavior either but it's clear that the lack of responding to the needs of those who are vulnerable or in need does not meet with the king's approval. In fact, it's made clear that missing those opportunities to generously respond to people who are vulnerable means missing the presence of Christ. And by missing Christ they miss out on life. They miss out on what really matters.

Maybe like me you can see both sheep and goat behavior in your life. And maybe like me when you recognize the goat in you, the prayer of confession I found this week needs to be your prayer, too:

Living God, we confess to You that our ways of justice are not Your ways. We want others to be punished when they have done wrong but we desire forgiveness for ourselves. We want others to suffer when we have suffered. Even in times when we feel morally just we desire vengeance over restoration. God, forgive us for our desire of retribution. Forgive us for not seeking Your ways. Forgive us, most of all, for not recognizing that it was You who died upon the cross at Calvary, going to death rather than seeking vengeance, giving eternal life and the promise of new life here on earth. Forgive us when we do things that seek to deepen wounds rather than bring healing. In the name of Christ, the Great Physician, we pray. Amen.

To be followed up with Paul's words of assurance to the congregation in Rome:

There is nothing you can do to separate yourself from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Nothing. Neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Go with this Good News. Amen. (Romans 8:38-39)

So considering that it all goes back in the box when it's all said and done, what matters? How do we live our lives in relationship to the most vulnerable among us? Can we see more deeply the presence of Christ in the acts of caring? Can we see Jesus in the person giving generously and thoughtfully?

In your bulletin you should each have a post-it note. You may be wondering what these easels are doing here. Well, now is your opportunity to share an answer to the question of what really matters. As you think about your place in the church, what really matters? Write a word or two that describes what matters most to you about being part of this community of faith? What really matters to you?

And then when you've written your note, we invite you to come to the front of the church. The ushers will be up front and you can come with your offering and your note, if you choose to come. Put your note on one of the easels and your offering in the plate. If you choose or aren't able to come an usher will be roaming around the sanctuary to receive your offering if you choose to make one.