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Familiarity can rob us of our sense of wonder – a gift we can ill afford to lose. If the trees only changed color once in our lifetime, how would we appreciate their grandeur? If the stars came out only once in 10,000 years, how many people would stop everything and fall down in awe and worship? If we had no idea when or if we would ever see, hold, or speak with someone again, how might that impact how we treat and respond to other people? Sometimes even the words of Jesus, which are as special in their own way as fall foliage, the night sky, and people, sometimes Jesus' words, in their familiarity, become ordinary and lose their power. Listen to Matthew 25:31-46:

“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 that 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 who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ ⁴¹ Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that 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.”

Only Matthew records this parable of the Last Judgment or the Judgment of the Nations. The importance of caring for and responding to the needs of the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick, or those in prison is so important to Jesus that he repeats it four times in this passage in the call and response between the Lord and the righteous and the unrighteous. There are three parables in Matthew 25 (the ten maidens, the talents, and the judgment) and they all warn those inside the faith community that our decision for the kingdom needs constant renewal. Following Jesus involves vigilance and readiness, a willingness to risk using our talents and engaging in acts of ministry and service to others because when we do so, we are serving the Lord himself.

In his vision of the Last Judgment, Jesus is restating the ancient truth shared in Isaiah 58. **Our relationship with others reveals our relationship with God.** Jesus spoke these words to his disciples on the Mount of Olives looking down upon Jerusalem. Shortly he would die the shameful death of a common criminal upon a cross. Yet he can say, *“When the Son of man comes in his glory...”* A manger for his birth, the gallows for his death, but he is speaking of and pointing to eternal glory. *“When the Son of Man comes in his glory all the nations will be gathered before him”* in a similar manner to the judgment scene portrayed in Ezekiel 34:17 which says, *“As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord God: I shall judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and goats.”*

Jesus often made strong distinctions between people. He said some build their lives on rock, others on sand; some are wheat and some are weeds; some walk the narrow way that leads to life, others the broad way that leads to destruction. Jesus will separate people one from another. The judgment Jesus makes has nothing to do with nationality, skin color, language, wealth, poverty, or education. The test is clearly stated – Jesus will judge us in accordance with our unconscious, uncalculating service and kindness to others in need. Not on the knowledge we’ve amassed, the fortune we’ve gained, or even how many times we attended worship – but on the service we have given. Because these small acts of service are the natural result of a living faith, they are not often even remembered. In the parable the righteous don’t have any recollection of seeing Jesus and serving him. They just were doing what they felt was right to help someone in need. Yet the Bible teaches us that small acts of service and kindness done to the overlooked and often ignored members of God’s family are done to Christ himself.

Jesus tells us there will be surprises on the Day of Judgment. The just or righteous are surprised, *“Lord when was it that we saw you?”* Their acts of simple service and kindness had not been done to gain human or divine approval. They simply

reflect the truth Jesus states in Luke 6:45, *“The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good.”* The service and acts of mission Jesus commends are simple things which anyone can do – give a meal or a drink, welcome a stranger, visit the sick or the prisoner. These acts don’t really require any specialized skill or training so much as they require a heart filled with love and a willing spirit.

In Jesus’ parable the folks who Jesus calls unrighteous, thought they were righteous and they are shocked and surprised that they are not going to an eternal reward. They want to know from Jesus, *“When did we see you”* and not respond. When Jesus tells them they are upset. Their line of thinking is, “Jesus, if I had known it was you I would have helped you out. But I thought it was just another poor, lazy, undeserving, immoral, stupid, person not worth helping.” The implication is, *“If we had known it was you, Jesus, I would have treated that person differently.”* Of course they would! Their failure was doing everything for their own calculated benefit. Christian service, mission engagement, and giving is not to be calculated either in amount, “Let’s see what I can afford to give after I’ve done everything I want for myself.” Nor is it calculated for effect, “I know I will get lots of praise and attention and publicity.” Service that wins the approval of God is given out of unmeasured Christian love.

As Christians, we are to answer God’s call to work together and to make disciples by having an attitude of **Service** and not **Serve-us**. I read about a pastor whose church, kind of like BBC, always has folks inside it because of its programs for the homeless, for those seeking to overcome addiction to alcohol or drugs, a food and clothing pantry, and a literacy ministry. Some of the church members were getting upset because of the appearance of some of the folks who were being served and the constant use of the facility. One man asked the pastor, *“What are you trying to do bringing all these people in here?”*

“Save people from hell,” the pastor replied. *“Oh, I see. You’re trying to save these people from hell,”* said the man. The pastor said, *“Not them, us!”*

BBC is a church that makes a significant effort to engage in risk taking mission and service. We could tell stories of mission trips to as far away as Northeast India and closer by to Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic and to many other states from as close as Maine to Mississippi and Alabama. There is always much to be done locally and even more around the globe. We can’t do everything. We can’t be everywhere, but we can support our missionaries who have gone all around the world to love and serve God’s people. The failure to love is its own punishment and curse.

Mother Teresa said, *“The poor are the hope of salvation for mankind. In the last judgment we will be judged according to what we have been toward them and what we have done for them. When Christ speaks about hunger, he is referring not merely to hunger for bread but to hunger for love, for understanding, for kindness.”*

Paul tells us it is not enough to come to worship and **hear** God's word. *“For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God's sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified...on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all (Romans 2:13, 16).”*

James tells us it is not enough to **think** we are religious. *“If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world (James 1:26-27).”*

John tells us it is not enough to **say** we love God's children while we cling to our own money and possessions. *“We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help (1 John 3:16-17).”*

There are many women and men serving as missionaries on our behalf who are seeking to serve the least of these all around the world. **Katherine and Wayne Niles** serve as missionaries to Interchurch Medical Assistance in Democratic Republic of Congo. They are involved in full-time service with IMA/ECC affiliated health and development activities in Congo. They both serve as liaison officers for IMA in matters related to HIV/AIDS and Maternal Health projects throughout the Africa continent. Wayne serves as the in-country liaison officer with IMA for financial and accounting matters. Additionally, Wayne has been helping Congolese people through a development project to grow more food. Among other activities, the project distributes new seeds, disease resistant varieties of crops, and offers women's groups small loans to purchase machines for hulling, milling, and producing oil.

Katherine is working with a group of Congolese Christian professionals in training community leaders, urban and rural, to be promoters of health in their communities. The staff of a church-related health center in Kinshasa is also using her expertise to make their medical ministry more holistic as they care for urban poor people.

Duane and Marcia Binkley serve Burmese ethnic Karen and Chin refugees both in the United States and Thailand. The Binkleys work with the tens of thousands of refugees coming to the U.S. while continuing to work with those still remaining in refugee camps along the Thai-Myanmar (Burma) border. The Binkleys are jointly appointed by International Ministries and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. Within the U.S. the Binkleys work with national and regional mission entities of American Baptist Churches USA and ABC and CBF local churches.

There are well over 100 such stories we could tell of faithful, dedicated individuals and families who face challenges and hardships every day in order to share the gospel, to draw people to Jesus, and to meet human needs in God's name. They are worthy of our prayerful and generous support. All of us are not called or sent to an international mission field, the ones who are sent need our prayers and our financial support. Our church goal for the WMO is \$7,500. I hope you will sincerely pray about what you can stretch to give so we can meet our goal to help people like the Niles, Binkley's, and so many others who seek to share and serve Jesus on our behalf.

A closing story - St. Martin of Tours was a Roman soldier. He had no money to give a beggar shivering in the cold so he took off his frayed and worn soldier's coat, cut it in half and gave half to the beggar. That night he had a dream of the heavenly places, the angels and Jesus in the midst of them; and Jesus was wearing half of a Roman's soldier's cloak. An angel asked, *"Master, why are you wearing that battered old cloak? Who gave it to you?"*

Jesus answered softly, *"My servant Martin gave it me."*

What will he say you gave?