

*“If Only...All the Nations”*

Sermon for Stewardship Series for First Christian Church of Decatur,  
Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, November 20, 2011

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Holy Scriptures: Matthew 25: 31-46

*The Judgment of the Nations*

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. <sup>32</sup> 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, <sup>33</sup> 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; <sup>35</sup> 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, <sup>36</sup> 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? <sup>38</sup> And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? <sup>39</sup> 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; <sup>42</sup> for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, <sup>43</sup> 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.’ <sup>46</sup> And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

## **If Only...All the Nations**

This is the fourth of four in a stewardship sermon series on the “If Only...” of our lives.

We’ve recalled the “if only” of our regrets and fears and missed opportunities.

We’ve contemplated the “if only” of imagining God’s prophecy and plans for us.

We’ve prayed for the power of God, “if only” we could and would utilize our talents.

And now the day has come to discern the ultimate “if only”...the offering of our lives.

Our lives: not only mine or yours but all of us.

We are in this together.

When Huey Long was Governor of Louisiana,

he traveled across the state preaching his share the wealth plan.

He was out in the bayou one hot afternoon at a town crossroads.

When he had gathered a crowd from the farms and diner and country store,

he began to teach and preach his populist message.

He wanted folks to know that he believed the common family

was being plundered by the organized wealthy interests in the state.

Looking out into the crowd he saw a man he knew.

“*Brother Jones,*” said Huey Long, “*if you had three Cadillacs,*

*wouldn't you give up one of them so we could gather up the children*

*and take them to school during the week and to church on Sunday?”*

Brother Jones said, “*Sure I would.*”

“*And if you had \$3 million, wouldn't you give up just one million*

*so we could put a roof over somebody's head*

*and make sure folks had decent food to eat?”*

“*Sure I would,*” agreed Brother Jones.

Huey Long was on a roll now. *“And if you three hogs...”*

*“Now hold on a minute,”* interrupted Brother Jones, *“I’ve got three hogs.”*

Now hold on a minute;

you are getting personal ‘cause I’ve got what someone else needs...

That, too often, is the limit,

regardless of whether you are progressive, moderate, or conservative,

consider yourself amongst the haves, have-nots,

or the have-some, want-some-mores.

It is what we do with what we’ve got

that reveals our priorities

regardless of whether we have it or not.

It is what we do with what we have to offer

– our lives, our resources, our time and talent and treasure,

our incredible capacity to love and to be loved in return –

what we do with the offerings of our lives

that reveals our priorities, reveals our faith, and reveals our future.

It is how we love with the love we have to offer

that reveals our priorities,

that will determine the quality of our life on earth

and be the final grade upon our reception

in the Kingdom of Heaven when our days  
on earth are done.

As Fred Craddock once shared in this significant pulpit

when speaking with us about the Final Judgment:

*“God grades on a curve;*

*the only question in the final exam is*

*how do you love your neighbor.”*

**We are in this together, you, me, all the nations.**

Jesus said that “All the nations” will be called before God to be judged on love.

The basis for the Final Judgment is our response to human need.

Are you as fascinated as I am

that Jesus begins the story of the Final Judgment with the words,

*“All the nations will be gathered before the Son of Man.”*

If ever there was scriptural, spiritual evidence

of God’s respect and recognition of the power of community, here it  
is.

We need each other to serve, to care, to love, to see Christ in the human  
condition,

and we need each other to be saved.

Our salvation is relational.

We need to see the Christ in each other...

to serve the Christ in each other...

and we need to do so together.

We are invited, called and compelled to serve Christ together.

Sometimes our communal relationships are easy, friendly, casual, or caustic,

sometimes strained, sometimes distant, sometimes close.

Yet the call is still there, still real, still grounded in love, and we still need each other.

We tend to think of our salvation in Christ as personal, as individualistic.

Have you ever heard someone say,

*“Do you accept Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior?”*

Yes, we have a personal relationship with the Living Christ, and He has one with you.

Yet in the closing chapters of Matthew, Jesus tells a tale to his followers

that foresees a Day of Judgment when all the nations,

all the communities of faith,

all the collected peoples of the earth

will find ourselves kneeling before God’s glorious throne

where we will be judged on the basis of love.

Love is the difference.

*“Love, seen in Jesus, is the central test of life on earth and heaven.”*

(The Interpreter's Bible, P. 565)

Jesus said: *“All the nations will be gathered before [the Son of Man],*

*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;*

*<sup>35</sup> 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.’*

God will look our nation in the eye and, in effect, ask,

*“Did you love?*

*Did you love me in my children in need in your midst?*

*Did your love lead you to serve the last, the lost, and the*

*least?*

*Or did your love lead you to only see and respond to those whose needs are well met?"*

I must continually remind myself that when a sister church serves,  
we are there.

When another nation with whom we partner makes a positive difference,  
we are there.

When another community of faithful people  
extends a cup of cold water to a thirsty soul  
or digs a well in a parched land  
or advocates for clean water and water  
conservation,  
we are there.

You and I can draw strength that  
not only are we present wherever good works are done  
by our partners in religious and political realms,  
so, too, when we serve, love and give in the name  
of Jesus Christ,  
they are here. *Thanks be to God!*

“This is the interrelated structure of reality.” (MLK, Jr.)

This is the work of the Holy Spirit.

This is the miracle of God, that one plus one plus one equals a million.

However, I must continually remind myself that when our sister churches serve,

I am not off the hook.

I must still do my part with this church, this city, this nation.

I will be judged by God by what we do as one, in His name.

The onus of Christian service is on all of us.

When my father, the Rev. George E. Calvert, was in home hospice care

and the end of his life on earth was nearly done,

he sat down with me and his former ministerial colleague to plan his funeral.

Suddenly George broke down and wept.

He confessed his guilt and shame

for *“the calls I didn’t make and the people I didn’t visit*

*and the opportunities missed to serve in the name of Christ.”*

Now here is a man who believed his middle initial E stood for Energy.

Here is a man who served as God’s servant leader in East Harlem for over 50 years.

Here is a man whose two memorial services

would be packed and last for hours

while grateful people told story after story

of how George Calvert had loved them and  
changed their lives.

And yet, my friends, in his final days

he felt the power of regrets and lost moments, the “If Onlys...” of  
his life.

Are you like me, able to imagine having the same thoughts before the throne  
of God?

Let us pause for a moment of reflection,

to silently contemplate and confess to God

our own regrets and missed opportunities

and our need for resolve to work and serve united  
in Christ.

(Moment of silence)

Jesus said,

*“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,*

*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.”*

On the basis of whether the nations kneeling before God

have served or failed to serve Christ,

the Lord separates them, sheep to the right and goats to the left.

“Both the sheep and the goats are surprised

that they have so served or failed to serve Christ.” -- Fred Craddock

Some are surprised

because they served selflessly, graciously, generously,

and did not know that that was Jesus

in the soul of the ones to whom they ministered.

They saw people, learned names, listened to their voices,

and were present and accounted for in the midst of needful things.

Even if it was never articulated, deep down they grasped that salvation is relational.

Some are surprised to find themselves standing with the goats,

yet if anyone had told them that Jesus was trying to get in to their parties,

surely they would have extended an invitation.

Everyone is surprised.

If only we offered our lives to Christ, fully and completely,

then the surprise will be

that our good works and good faith and good hope

will be a blessing and meet a need.

One day in the early 1950s

my parents sent my eldest brothers David and Jonathan outside to play.

We lived in one of a row of tenements in East Harlem.

There was a safe play area nearby,

and our mother could watch from her window as the boys went down the street.

David and Jon were around 5 and 4, respectively.

When they walked out the front door immediately a man on the street stopped and said,

*“Let me take your picture.”*

David and Jonathan had been taught to be wary and not take candy from strangers,

so they shrank back, uncomfortable,

and leaned into each other in the corner of the doorway on the stoop

as he snapped away.

A short while later a poster was put up in churches and temples across the city.

The poster featured two children in play clothes, with huge eyes and frightened looks,

huddled together in a slum tenement doorway.

Buffy and George Calvert were quite surprised when they saw the poster,

and recognized their own children!

The poster read: *“These Children Need Your Help! Please Give!”*

These days Jon laughs when he recalls that morning on the stoop and subsequent poster,

and he says, *“Hey, it’s still true. Send money! I can put it to good use!”*

Jesus wants to know what your response will be

to our common humanity and our common needs.

The modern Word of God proclaims,

*“Hey, it’s still true. Send money! Christ can put it to good use!”*

Jesus collects our pooled resources and empowers us to feed and quench and serve.

Observe well that Jesus sides with the poor and the desperate,

the alien in our midst,

the cold and the shabby and the ill,

the confined, the isolated, the shut in, shut out, and shut away.

He reminds us that “service to another is service to Christ.”

(Preaching Through the Christian Year, Year A, page 519)

Here is the catch: our salvation is relational.

Those in need in our fair city and in our families and neighborhoods

are not nameless nor are they faceless,

a vague amorphous “them” somewhere out “there”.

All the nations are called to see the beauty and the name of persons in need.

One of the sins of Penn State is that it valued the institution above a child.

The Catholic Church has committed the same crime.

We are all guilty, yes, of valuing the nations above the needy?

Let us not repeat or perpetuate the sin of disregard and disrespect.

When we minister, let us see and cherish each soul Christ sends.

Let us offer the best of ourselves.

Each of us hungers, thirsts, has a need for community, to be respected and recognized.

So, it is no stretch at all to know and affirm

that our brothers and sisters in our city’s slums have hearts of gold,

that they love and live and laugh as we all do,

and that every child of God has a name and a face,

a hope and a dream, and that we all have

needs.

If only...

If only we offered our lives.

It is what we do with what we've got

that reveals our priorities

regardless of whether we have it or not.

What do you have to offer?

What talents and treasures and gifts have you been given by Christ

to be shared for the common good?

This fall we are invited to make a pledge commitment for 2012.

Our Stewardship Covenant form includes all the ministries of the church.

Everyone is welcome to prayerfully sign up for a ministry in 2012.

Try something new.

Surprise yourself.

Select one major ministry, one minor area, and support one another.

Make a financial commitment, and then follow through by giving sacrificially.

Jesus hit the nail on the head when he said,

*“Where your treasure is, there will your heart be as well.”*

Give sacrificially, give your best, give your life and your love.

And you know what?

In the end, one way or another,

we'll all be surprised,

together,

before the throne of God.

*All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!*