

“Just As You Did It to One of the Least of These”

Matthew 25:31-46

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I've always been interested in where people live. I love being invited to homes. Recently, I had barely entered the front door of a home when the 5 year old boy grabbed my hand and hauled me upstairs to show me his bedroom! This child wanted me to see where he lives! Some of us here have lived in the exact same place our entire lives. Others have lived in dozens of places. My journey has taken me from Monson, Massachusetts to East Longmeadow to South Glastonbury to Westfield to San Antonio to Salima to Eagle Butte to Wisconsin and back to South Glastonbury! If you ask me where I live, I might say, Buck's Corner!

In the Bible story for today, Jesus teaches his disciples that there are really only two places to live: **in** the Kingdom or **not** in the Kingdom. And he hopes that everyone will live **IN** the Kingdom.

The Kingdom he had in mind doesn't have any boundary lines or geographical features. Not even a zip code. It is not a physical place like Glastonbury or Hartford or Africa. The Kingdom he hopes we'll all live in is a place where people care deeply about each other. He calls that place the Kingdom of God. This place can be anywhere people care about each other! The other place, where people really don't care at all about each other, is a place where he hopes the population will be zero!

Jesus says that in the Kingdom no one goes hungry because somebody notices and does something about it! Last Sunday night I was driving home from Virginia and I reached Hartford at 5:30.

So I decided to stop at Peter's Retreat because I knew our Middle School Youth in Mission were serving the supper at that homeless shelter. When I pulled into the driveway, I was astounded beyond measure. What I witnessed moved me to tears. Some of our youth were outside in the dark raking up all the leaves around the shelter. Some were serving helpings of wholesome food to the residents who all live with an HIV positive diagnosis. And others were cleaning a room, making it ready for a new resident waiting to move in. This is what Jesus called "Kingdom living." Our seventh and eighth grade youth and their advisors were demonstrating that they actually care about other people.

Two Sundays ago, I heard that one of the church's neighbors was cold. The truck with the heating oil from the local fuel bank was delayed. So, I asked from this pulpit if anyone had a space heater to lend. After the sermon and after the coffee hour, I made my way to the red truck. And there on the front seat was a brand new, still-in-the-box, space heater! Where did that come from???? It came from the place of caring. It came from someone who noticed and responded. It came from someone whose address is the Kingdom of God.

According to the parable that Jesus taught, the people living in the Kingdom do their caring work without realizing that in caring for the broken-hearted, they are caring for Christ; that in caring for the hungry and the cold and the lonely they are caring for Christ; that in caring for the grievors and the imprisoned and the mentally challenged, they are caring for Christ. Their caring work is second nature to them; they do it because it is a natural manifestation of their discipleship. They do it because they are hard-wired for caring ministry.

Living in the Kingdom has to do with noticing the ones at risk: the wounded ones, the fragile ones; and then acting decisively to make a difference.

Since way before my time here, we have enjoyed the ministry of the Christian Service Team. These women and men serve Christ week in and week out. They are ones who notice who needs a ride a church and make sure a connection is made. They are the ones who bring a hot meal to your home soon after you've been discharged from the hospital. They are the ones who minister to grieving families with warm, hospitable receptions after funerals. They are ones who notice and respond. They are not the only ones who notice and respond, but they are the ones specifically charged with this ministry. I invited this ministry team to come and be in church this morning. Would those of you now serving on Christian Service please stand? And would anyone who has ever served on Christian Service also stand? Thank you! You all are living in the Kingdom! You are modeling for the rest of us what Kingdom living is all about.

I believe Jesus wanted his disciples to invite their neighbors and people far and wide to live in the Kingdom; that we would all share the same address. In a way, this is what it means to be a person of faith: to notice where love is needed, and then to find a way to deliver that love. Now here's the amazing thing: the one who delivers the caring benefits as much as the one who receives the caring. I can't explain how this is so. I just know it is true.

My son, Russ, told me the other day he was in the grocery store check out line, and he turned to the shopper behind him and offered to bag her groceries for her. She was shocked! And he was shocked that she was shocked! He says they both walked to their cars feeling more hopeful than ever before. He had once been a bagger in a grocery store in Lititz, Pennsylvania, but he had been paid for that work. It was his job. It was a completely different experience bagging the groceries as a simple act of caring. He is living in the Kingdom.

As Thanksgiving approaches, I am in touch with my gratitude for a congregation whose address remains the same year after year; whose commitment to caring runs deep. Because you care so much, you are a light in this world; you are, indeed, living in the Kingdom!

I'll carry my gratitude with me right to the Thanksgiving table at Barnstable, on Cape Cod where I will remain in the greatest of hope.

Rather than end this sermon with my usual words of hope, I am inviting Amanda Baksa to complete this sermon with a few words about what her participation on the Christian Service team has meant to her. Amanda, step to the microphone!