

“Reverse Mission”
Matthew 25.31-40
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First Presbyterian Church of Spruce Pine
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Because of our recent mission trip to Kentucky, we are taking a break from our ongoing study of the book of Acts. Instead, last week and this week I’m inviting us to reflect on the nature of Christian mission. Next week we will return to the book of Acts, picking up in chapter 9 with the story of the conversion of Paul on the Damascus Road. But today I invited you again to think about what Christian mission is all about. So Christian Mission, part 2 - today’s theme is “Reverse Mission.”

If you remember from last Sunday, I tried to make the case that Christian mission is much more than just telling people about Jesus. Since Jesus did not go around preaching about himself but rather he proclaimed the coming of God’s Kingdom, Christian mission is about that - it’s about witnessing to God’s kingdom - it’s about living into God’s reign in the here and now. Last Sunday as we looked at the book of James, we were reminded that as followers of Jesus our mission is also to put our faith in action through acts of love and compassion and justice for all. When we do this we witness to God’s reign here on earth as it is in heaven.

Today we are going to hear some reflections from those who traveled to eastern Kentucky a couple of weeks ago, a dedicated group who sought to put their faith in action. We are also going to see some pictures of the work they accomplished rehabbing three homes belonging to three families. But before we do that let us turn our attention to God’s Word as it comes to us from Mathew’s gospel, chapter 25, beginning with verse 31 as found in your bulletin. Jesus tells this parable:

"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. 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, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

"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; 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, 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.' 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? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?'

"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.'

The Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

Someone who influenced me a lot when I was growing up was my Uncle Mike. Uncle Mike was a devout Christian who taught me a lot about the Christian faith, both by the example he lived as well as the words he spoke. Uncle Mike worked for years at the local American Cancer Society, helping to raise awareness and support in the fight against all forms of cancer. He loved to send cards and letters to all his family and friends, and when I went to college I remember how he would send me a letter almost every week. (Before we had text messages and emails, getting real mail in your box was huge!) On the back of the envelopes he would send me would often be a sticker of his favorite Bible verse from the book of James: ***“Be doers of the word, not just hearers.”*** This is a verse from the book of James, chapter 1 verse 22 - and this emphasis on doing good works sums up well the theology of James, as we heard last week his argument that “faith without good works is dead.” And this emphasis on doing good works is part of not only our Protestant church culture but also part of the value we Americans place on being doers. We are simply taught to get things done!

This emphasis on the importance of doing for others has stuck with me over the years, and I can venture that the Protestant work ethic has influenced us all. Yes, we are often taught mission is about getting stuff done for other people, and so I have gravitated towards hands-on mission throughout my life and ministry. And I know this is true for many of you as well.

Over the years of my ministry I have participated in many mission experiences like the one to Kentucky. These are some of the best experiences I ever have in ministry, opportunities to travel with an intergenerational group to learn and grow and yes do many things for others. In my previous work with [Asheville Youth Mission](#), I coordinated groups who would work in gardens in Black Mountain, sort furniture and homegoods for formerly homeless neighbors who were moving into a new home - volunteers came to AYM to mow lawns for the elderly and sort food for the hungry - yes, there is so much for us as Christians to do! But over the years as I have reflected on these mission experiences, I began to see a pattern developing. Groups of well meaning volunteers are always willing to give of their time and energy and skills - fixing homes that were in need of repair, feeding people who were hungry - well meaning Christians seeking to put their faith in action, being doers of the word. But here's the deal: as long as mission is defined as a one way transaction, meaning we “the givers” are here to give to you “the needy” then something is missing. If the focus is on how much “we” the givers could do to help “you” the receivers, then the mission is missing something. Somehow, mission as a one way transaction can keep the well intentioned volunteers thinking they somehow were the only ones meant only to give, that their job was to help those “less fortunate.” And in this way of looking at things, the needy are only asked to receive.

The late great theologian and spiritual teacher Henri Nouwen expressed an idea that addresses this faulty understanding of mission. Nouwen's idea is simply this: when we are out in the world doing God's work, being the hands and feet and very heart of God, when we are putting our faith in practice as James teaches us to do, being not simply hearers but doers of the word - **when we are doing mission for others there is always a reverse mission going on, too.** Nouwen says he first heard of this term “reverse mission” when he was a missionary in Peru. He writes, “I had come from the North to the South to help the poor, but the longer I was among the poor the more I became aware that there was another mission, the mission from the South to the North. When I returned to [North America], I was deeply convinced that my main task would be to help the poor of Latin America convert their wealthier brothers and sisters in the United States and Canada.” He continues, “Ever since that time, I have become aware that wherever God's Spirit is present there is a reverse mission” ([Here and Now: Living in the Spirit](#), p. 65).

Yes, wherever God's Spirit is present there is a reverse mission. As a young priest Henri marched with thousands of black and white Americans from Selma to Montgomery. It was during this time he heard MLK, Jr. talk about the reverse mission of the civil rights movement, meaning that the blacks were calling the whites to conversion. Later Henri lived in a community in Canada that housed mentally handicapped people, and he soon realized that his task would be to let those whom he wanted to help offer their gifts to him. According to Nowen, "This 'reversal' is a sign of God's Spirit. The poor have a mission to the rich, the blacks have a mission to the whites, the handicapped have a mission to the [so called] normal" (p.66). Though our culture wants to make mission a one way transaction, when so-called "privileged" are helping those "less fortunate," Christian mission is something different. Christian mission is always two ways because we are all both givers and receivers at the same time.

When we spend energy and time volunteering at agencies like Neighbors Feeding Neighbors and the Shepherd's Staff, we accomplish a lot to help the thousands of folks in our county who are food insecure. I have just joined the board of the Shepherd's Staff, and I had a proud pastor moment when I saw how many of you are volunteering at the Empty Bowls event this coming Saturday! This is important work for us to do, and yes many will be helped. ***But when we volunteer to help others in this way something happens to us as well.*** We may become aware of all the blessings we have, and how we so easily can take for granted that we have food in our bowls everyday while many of our neighbors don't. But it shouldn't just stop there - as we grow in gratitude for God's bounty in our lives, we may realize that God's desire is for everyone to share in the bounty of God's abundance. You see, in God's kingdom no one should see an empty bowl on their table, and all of God's children should have their daily bread. And for me it has been at this moment that the reverse mission begins to happen - in seeing the needs of our neighbors God speaks to us, calling us to be converted, calling us to change our patterns of living, our patterns of consumption. When we are feeding others we can become aware of our relationship with food, too. It's easy to fall into the trap of scarcity, believing there's not enough to go around, and so we try and grab what we can. The reverse mission of the hungry to those who are full could be the invitation for us to depend more consciously on God for our daily bread. The 2 cents a meal offering we collect every month is based on this idea of a reverse mission - what if every time we give thanks for a meal we are eating, we set aside some funds to feed the hungry? And what if in addition to providing funds, we hear God's call to be advocates, to be the voice of those who are living on the margins, to speak to our elected officials about the need for more funding to address poverty, to take our cues from the Hebrew prophets who called for justice to roll down like waters? Yes, when we do one act of charity - feeding the hungry, donating our time and energy to do good works - I believe we are putting ourselves in a position for God to work on us, to call us to be converted from our normal ways of living to something new. Yes, wherever God's Spirit is present there is a reverse mission, and the reverse mission is the thing that just may change our lives.

Today's scripture from Matthew 25 is a reminder of how God's Spirit is present in this mission reversal. Jesus in the role of divine judge announces to those on his right hand, those whom he calls his sheep - that when they fed the hungry, gave the thirsty something to drink, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, took care of the sick, visited the prisoner - when they did these good works, these acts of compassion - they were actually doing it to him. "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."

When we feed the hungry and clothe the naked, we are not only meeting the needs of the person right before us, as important as that may be - but we are coming directly into the surprising presence of Christ. I say the "surprising presence of Christ" because the sheep in doing their good works, did not realize they were "doing it unto the Lord." But they were! Without trying to romanticize the poor or trivialize the suffering they may face, when we come close to those living on the margins - the hungry and the thirsty, those experiencing homelessness and poverty and poor living conditions like we saw in Knott County, Kentucky - when we come face to face with the poor we are coming into the presence of Jesus. And it is here in his presence that the reverse mission happens - in the presence of Christ we are called to change, to be converted from the ways of this world to the ways of God's kingdom, to better reflect the justice and love and mercy of Christ in our lives. If you ask anyone of those who participated in the mission trip this year or in past ones if they received more than they gave, I bet the answer is yes. Yes, the giving is important but it is the reverse mission that will change us all. Thanks be to God, Amen.