

“The Sheep and the Goats – a Meditation for the Fifth Sunday in Lent”

The Rev. Jennifer Cameron

March 29, 2020 – St. Columba Presbyterian Church, Belleville

Matthew 25:31-46

³¹ “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

³⁴ “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶ I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

³⁷ “Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

⁴⁰ “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’

⁴¹ “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’

⁴⁴ “They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’

⁴⁵ “He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’

⁴⁶ “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

Well, it’s official. The Government of Ontario has published a list of essential businesses and we’re not on it. I’ve just finished watching a documentary series on the history of Christianity, and throughout the centuries there have always been those who say the church, as an institution, isn’t necessary for daily life. There have been persecutors of the church. Even within the church itself there has been division as people claim one doctrine or another to be true or false. Today, there is widespread indifference to the church, which may be even more dangerous than opposition because it means there are fewer that care about the church.

But God cares.

And we care.

I see where the government is coming from. They are thinking about those practical, basic needs that sustain people in a time of crisis – food, health care, resources. I get it. These days people are realizing what is important, what our priorities are. But I must admit to feeling a little disappointed that our society doesn't place a high value on what the church offers – worship, care, fellowship – and that when we cannot gather as a community of faith it has a profound impact on our lives. John Wesley once said there is no such thing as a solitary Christian, and he was absolutely correct. We are called to follow Jesus as disciples, and we are called to do so with the support and nurturing of the community of faith. How can we be a community when we cannot gather?

It comes down to a simple question: is the church a place or a people? We all know the answer to that question. As the hymn goes: I am the church! You are the church! We are the church together! All who follow Jesus, all around the world, yes, we're the church together! Does the whole world gather for worship in one location? Of course not. But it is still the church. We are still a community of faith even when we are not meeting face to face. We are still sisters and brothers united to each other and to God through faith in Jesus. It is a privilege to gather for worship, study and fellowship, but the church does not lose its identity when we are physically apart from each other. In fact, we may have a wonderful opportunity to grow as a community of faith in these unusual days.

A letter went out to the congregation early this week in which we are encouraged to stay in contact with each other. We can pick up the phone, send a card, text or email, we can even video chat so we can still see each other. A few days ago I heard a story of a young woman who

lives alone and is really struggling with loneliness. Health issues make her more vulnerable to the virus that is keeping us all at home. A couple with whom she has been friends for a number of years texted her, telling her to go to her front door. She did, and found them standing at the foot of her driveway with signs they'd made just to say hello and let her know she is loved by her friends. It made her day! How simple was that action, and how profound the impact. A lonely person felt connected by the kindness of community.

In Jesus' words in Matthew 25, we are reminded that his followers are to act on their love for him by loving and caring for others. It can be as simple as standing at the foot of a driveway with a sign to say hello. It can be as easy as sending a funny cartoon to someone who needs a laugh. It can be as comfortable as offering to pick up a few basic groceries for someone who needs the help. It can be as common as picking up the phone to call someone who may be feeling forgotten. It can be as uncomplicated as praying for someone in an email. When we care for others with compassion, mercy and attentiveness, we extend the love and grace of Christ.

The church may not be seen as an essential business in society, but we know differently. We are in the business of building community, nurturing faith, and caring for each other. It may not be a business like a bank or grocery store, but for those who follow Jesus, it is indeed essential. The church building is not be in use for the moment, but the community of faith is very much open for business. The church doesn't close, because the church is a living, growing body. It is the body of Christ. It is you, me, the Presbyterian Church in Canada, and other denominations in Canada and throughout the world. It is the people of God, a community connected by love and grace. It is a people connected by the Holy Spirit dwelling within us and moving among us. There may be indifference to the church and its presence in the world, but that indifference does not close our doors. A virus is preventing us from gathering, but that virus does

not shut the church down. Rather, it is giving us new opportunities to be creative in our ministry and intentional about connecting with each other, nurturing community.

So be creative! Do something to surprise someone – you may even surprise yourself! The seemingly smallest effort can make a tremendous difference for someone. I would love to hear your stories about how you've been touched by someone, or by how you have made someone's day. These are the moments that sustain us in strange times, and they are moments I enjoy hearing about because they communicate the love of Jesus!

God bless you with openness to the leading of the Holy Spirit as we all strive to build community in these unusual days. Amen.