

January 20, 2019
Matthew 25:34-40
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“Doing”

Good morning! This Sunday is the second of a three-part series on Being, Doing, Becoming. As you may remember -- or possibly not -- I shared some words of wisdom last week from great philosophers about being and doing: which comes first, Who we are, or what we do? [Slide 1] Here’s how some of the great minds of the past few centuries have weighed in: Nietzsche -- to be is to do; Kant: to do is to be; Sinatra: Do be do be do. Someone who saw these quotes last week suggested that maybe we should subscribe to the Baby Shark philosophy, which is: Baby Shark Do do do do do do. That would be a lot of doing. I suppose it’s possible to get too silly about all this, because it’s a serious question.

The first part of my answer is based on the story of Jesus’ baptism, which we find both in Luke chapter 3 and Matthew chapter 3. Both of those accounts have the heavens opening, the Holy Spirit descending like a dove, and a voice which says, “This is my Son, the Beloved. In him I am well pleased.” This happens at the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry -- before he has taught anything to a crowd, healed a single person, or performed a miracle of any kind. Jesus would do all of those things later, of course, but he was named as God’s beloved before any of that happened. Because of these gospel narratives, I believe that being comes before doing: identity comes before purpose; the affirmation that we are God’s beloved in Christ is the foundation of who we are: what we do is built upon the conviction of who we are. Of course it isn’t only we who are God’s beloved: all people are created in God’s image, but only those who claim Jesus as Lord and Savior have fully accepted their identity and the gift of God’s love. What I’d like to explore today is that if we have claimed our identity as followers of Jesus Christ, what claim does that make on

us? In other words, if we claim to be Christians, what does that mean for what we do?

I know, or at least have a general idea about what many of you do for a living, or did before you retired. Although just a few of you have been paid by a congregation or denomination to do Christian ministry, I know for sure that without the things that all of you do, this congregation and every other congregation I know would fall apart. Often there is a significant intersection between skills you have acquired for your paid work outside of the church and what you do to volunteer within the church; sometimes these are fairly obvious -- skills with accounting or music -- and sometimes less so -- gardening, photography, sensitivity to group dynamics, recognizing and affirming gifts in other people. If there is one thing I have learned in my life and in ministry, it is that God wastes nothing. If we are willing to offer what we have, there will be a way to use it for the kingdom of God.

I'm going to do something in this sermon which preachers are not supposed to do: don't be too alarmed; there is a long list of things which preachers are not supposed to do, and this one is probably only a misdemeanor. I chose this text from Matthew 25 because of what the faithful are doing and the unfaithful are NOT doing: so far so good. But I chose to have Anne read the King James Version because of a specific word I want to highlight; a word I want to think about in the context of our lives and what we do. You can find this word in Matthew 25 verse 40 and Matthew 25 verse 45. Here's the word: In As Much. In the King James it is all one word with no caps: inasmuch. It means "just as," or "in the way that." Jesus is telling the crowd that *in the way that* they fed the hungry and clothed the naked and cared for the sick they did that for Jesus. Conversely, *in the way that* they saw people who were hungry and thirsty and naked and sick and in prison and did NOT do anything, they neglected to help Jesus. Are you with me? Nothing I'm about to say contradicts any of the sense of that phrase from the King James version.

Scott Harney didn't know when he made this crate, that he was giving me an object lesson for today's sermon: I didn't know that when he made the crate either, but not only does God not waste our gifts, but God can use them in ways that we hadn't imagined. So thank you,

Scott. During Advent you all filled this crate with books for Elkhart Child Development Center, and hats and mittens and scarves for Bashor Children's home, and clothes and other donations for the Arritt family to support their work in Malaysia with Wycliffe bible Translators. But today this crate is a metaphor for our lives and what we do. Ta-da! Notice that this crate is empty. That's the way we all start. As an elderly man noted, "I came into this life with nothing, and I've still got most of it left."

The obvious place for me to go with this metaphor is to say, our lives are empty, we need to put In As Much as we can. Because we can only give away In As Much as we have put in. Right? Well, sorta. That may be correct, but it is not complete. That equation of accumulating as much as we can so that we have some extra to give away is a concrete, Western, first-world way of seeing our lives. But it isn't the only way to see our lives, and perhaps it isn't even the way of seeing our lives which is closest to the teaching of Jesus Christ. Here is another view, which is also correct: if this crate is full to the brim, we can't put anything else in it. If we put In As Much as this crate can hold and don't take anything out, all we will ever have is what's here right now. If we put In As Much as we can and hold on to it, not even God can add anything else.

So what's the answer, preacher? Are our lives supposed to be empty or are our lives supposed to be full? Yes. I believe that is the lesson of Matthew 25. When we give of ourselves to others -- like those folks who fed the hungry and cared for the sick -- we are emptying our lives. Not necessarily emptying our pockets by paying for food or buying medicine, but emptying ourselves of our superiority and our need for recognition because we're serving people who can't give us those things. Poor nameless strangers -- the least of these -- are not going to help us professionally or even personally. We're taking care of others because we are God's children and we know that they are God's children, too. We're doing it because God loves us and we want to share that love with other people, not because we expect to be honored or recognized. Because we won't be. That's the emptying part.

You might remember the song "Magic Penny" that we sang as part of the children's story in Advent. I'm going to say the chorus, and if you

know it, say the last line with me: Love is something if you give it away, give it away, give it away, Love is something if you give it away, you end up having more. God's love doesn't originate from us, so we can't exhaust the supply: the more we try to give it away, the more we will have. There are lots of things we can do and lots of ways to fill up our lives, but I believe it is the things we give away -- especially those we give as followers of Christ -- which give meaning to our lives.

[Slide 2] I would guess that most of us, including me, have things in our lives which are necessary, but not particularly meaningful. Sometimes this a matter of changing our perspective: scrambling to fix a meal for unappreciative family members may not feel very meaningful, but taking a meal to someone who can't get out in cold weather is a ministry. If your life feels so crammed full of obligations and activities that there isn't room for meaning and ministry, you might need to give something away. If your life feels empty of meaning and purpose, you might need to give something away and see what God will add.

I am trying very hard not to draw an equivalence between how much we do and how much we are loved by God: this is known as "works righteousness,"; it's an easy equation to make, and it's wrong. No one in this church or in any church should suggest that you can earn your way into heaven or earn God's love by your good deeds. We may see what you do or don't do, but only God knows what it costs you. A small deed done with great love may fill this crate more than a big gesture intended to impress those around you or impress God. We cannot earn our salvation -- Christ as already bought it for us. The best we can do is to let other people know what Christ has done for us and what Christ wants to do for them. Living In As Much lives means balancing who we are with what we do: it means loving others in the way that Christ loved us: without any condition of being recognized or having that love returned. It means putting In As Much meaning in our lives as we can by giving ourselves away. It means emptying ourselves so that we can be filled by God so that we can give it away and be filled all over again.

It is not every week that outreach opportunities drop in my lap -- or hit me over the head. But I have two to tell you about -- one is a reminder of what Lodema shared in the announcements: Church Community

Services has asked for donations of canned soup and crackers through Sunday, February 3; the day of the Super Bowl. The In As Much crate will be in the Gathering Area; put In As Much as you can, and we will give it all away after February 3.

The second opportunity is a bit more involved, and you'll be hearing more about it in the next few weeks. Church World Service in Elkhart is assembling Ration Assistance Packets in support of refugees all over the world. These are God's children who are hungry, thirsty, naked, and sick, individuals and family units living on the edge of society and often on the edge of survival. Church World Service needs folks to assemble individual zip lock bags of rice, lentils, and chickpeas. Their problem is that this assembly needs to be done in a state certified kitchen. Ed Bellows is a friend of Roger Griffith's: he is the printer who did our Creekside calendars, and Church World Service contracted with him to do the printing and packaging for the Ration Assistance Packets. Ed remembered that Creekside has a state certified kitchen and contacted us. God uses everything. Church World Service needs to assemble 6,500 packets by the end of February. That's 19,500 ziplock bags. They are providing all the dry goods and materials, we are putting out a call to Sunday School classes or other groups at Creekside and in the N IN District to commit to a couple hours during the day or during an evening to assemble bags of rice, lentils or chickpeas. Let me know if you're interested. Inasmuch as we do it for the least of these, we do it for Jesus Christ. May God bless us in our being and in our doing. Amen.