

Sermon November 26, 2017 Get it? Got it. Good! Cara B. Hochhalter

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24 and Matthew 25:31-46

I love when we have an extra Sunday after Thanksgiving and before the start of Advent... I am still in a Thanksgiving mode... I want to share something I was going to tell you last week, but ran out of time...I heard it from the Native American woman and botanist, Robin Wall Kimmerer. She says that all Native peoples all over the world share a culture of gratitude... so imagine this summarized version of a Thanksgiving Address, in your mind:

First thanks is given for the faces around us as we seek to become one. Thanks for Mother Earth and all she provides. Thanks for water, for fish, for fields of plant-life and the foods they offer. Thanks for herbs and their medicine, for trees, for animals and for birds. Thanks for the winds and the four seasons. Thanks for thunder and lightening, for stars, the moon and sun. Thanks for enlightened teachers.

And then it says: "We now turn our thoughts to the Creator, Great Spirit, [or God], and send greetings and thanks for all the gifts of Creation. Everything we need to live a good life is here on Mother Earth. For all the love that is still around us, we gather our minds together as one and send our choicest words of greetings and thanks to the Creator."

Let us be in prayer: God of all Creation, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together, be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer. Amen

To be grateful puts us in touch with our surroundings in such beautiful ways, doesn't it...perhaps we could make every day, every moment, a thankful one.

Now to an amazing parable found in Matthew 25. I remember hearing this while I was in a youth group WAY back when I was a teenager. It grabbed my attention then...like scripture can do...and I think it changed my life!

Jesus had been preparing his disciples for when he would leave them... and he tells them to be ready...for his coming back, for a realm of God to be realized more fully, for the world to be transformed. But in this *meantime*, they are not to just sit around doing nothing...but to use their God-given gifts and not to squander them!

Matthew's telling adds some harsh language making it judgmental....He says that Jesus will return and declare who is doing it right and who is wrong....the goats and the sheep and all that!

Kathryn Matthews writes that religion and judgement have been so *unhappily* married for so long, when in fact, Jesus had a lot to say about NOT judging one another! He opposed our excluding some people because they appear to be sinners... Jesus, above all others reached *across* these divides to see the love reflected in all persons...Jesus, taught about forgiveness and inclusive love...

The wonderful Jesuit priest, Father Greg Doyle who works with gang members in Los Angeles, says that in our compassion, we open up a willingness to be in kinship ... not judgment...and then we experience the awe of God!

So we forgive Matthew his condemnation and obsession with people being thrown into hell and the gnashing of teeth.... because the gist of this parable is pretty powerful, indeed! It still bowls me over with its simplicity and power!

The wisdom of it goes like this: *When we forget ourselves and help someone else...we meet God there.*

The parable goes like this: Jesus is asked who will get into heaven and he says that when he returns, people, like sheep or goats, will come before him and he will say to those who are blessed, "You will inherit the kingdom for I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick and in prison....and you cared for me!" But they will say, "When did we ever do that?" (This part always makes me smile...they don't get it! Like when someone thanks you for something and you say, "When did I ever do that?")

Jesus says, "Whenever you fed, clothed, healed and visited...the least of these, who are members of my family, you did it to me."

And then he supposedly rejects all those who *failed* to help those in need...saying that in their neglect, they also rejected *him*. "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." I think this is called the "sin of omission." It is not just what we *do* do, but what we fail to do.

Jesus said, "...just as you did it to one of the least of these *who are members of my family*...you did it to me." What would that mean if we saw the poor, the sick, the hungry, the prisoners....as members of *our* family! Which of course...they *are*, in the larger view. .... And then with that kind of relational interaction, with a new "kinship",

we meet God there.... So perhaps it is not just about serving, but bridging the gap between the server and the served and realizing that we are *all* in this together!

This is huge. But do *we* get it?

Get it? Got it. Good! My sister used to say this and we would laugh...but I couldn't remember where it came from. I emailed her yesterday...and thanks to her much better memory than mine... and the benefits of technology, she sent a clip from the Danny Kaye movie, "The Court Jester!" Do you remember it? The Jester requests to get into the King's chambers and his assistant says, "You want to get into the King's chambers?" The jester answers in the affirmative and then says, "Get it?" His helper says, "Got it." And The Jester responds with, "Good!" It's still funny but the next part about the Dutchess and the Duke is even funnier...

But I better get back to our parable! Do we *get* this? In our giving for those in need, no matter how they appear to us in our varied lives, we connect with something holy and amazing. And sometimes we realize that it is we ourselves who are in need of this reciprocity of caring...

Some of you were at the Thanksgiving Service last week at Mary Lyon church. The Rev. Rich Fournier talked about a project he has been involved with for years. It is called the Polus Center. It started when a friend of his who lived in Northampton, had some prosthetic limb components....I don't know how he got them or how many there were but he wanted to take them somewhere where they could be used. He found a place in Nicaragua so he asked Rich if he would go with him to deliver them. This was the start of a 37-year project. Incredibly, just 4 people lead this effort but now they have gone to 15 countries, started clinics, and organized relief for thousands of women, children and men who have been victims of landmines and war. Through their listening and then networking, they offer all kinds of supportive services for prosthetic users.

With tears in his eyes, Rich said he doesn't talk about this work very often because it is so poignant for him. People so often tell him how good he is to do this and how unselfish he is... He and his team say, "No, you don't understand the incredible joy and reward WE feel to do this work. To see children who were devastated by war, now able to live as children....this is a reward beyond anything we have known."

"I was sick and you took care of me...." "In the ways that you helped the least of these, you also helped me," Jesus said.

I had a seminary professor who said that you can tell when you are getting close to God when you get that "catch in your throat." You know what I am talking about? Sometimes it comes when you least expect it...when you are around incredible beauty or you experience forgiveness, or you make a selfless act of generosity for the good of someone else....and you realize, you were the one in need of this kind of giving...

If you go to the Polus Center website that Rich works with, there is a video of a doctor in Massachusetts who retired from a business in prosthetics...He wanted to give all his prosthetic components to the Polus Center. He was asked why, when he could make a lot of money selling the equipment...This doctor gets choked up and says that he has been blessed in his life and there comes a time when you need to give back.

Giving back....that's what Jesus was talking about.

I had that feeling at our Thanksgiving Dinner...45 people came here for a variety of reasons to enjoy a great meal at our church's hospitality...and the gratitude expressed was a beautiful thing! It has been a special project of Jeff and mine because, well....we do not have family here either...and I get choked up to see everyone enjoying a meal together.

But before I start feeling smug about this, I will tell you about a celebrity chef named José Andrés who went to Puerto Rico and started cooking for people after Hurricane Maria. Since then, his organization called *World Central Kitchen* has cooked *2.3 million meals* and counting...and they delivered warm Thanksgiving meals to 40,000 people!

Makes our 45 meals sound rather meager...but you know what? We, each of us, respond as we can to the people and needs *we are made aware of* at the time. Each of us are circles of awareness...and different needs become important to us...If we listen for that nudge...as individuals and together as a church, we can respond to the least of these, as Jesus called us to do.

Kate Stevens has been writing to prisoners on death row at a prison in Missouri...and just recently sent a link about the need for volunteers to write to inmates. If this speaks to you, let me know. And now Kate is inspired to learn more about those who are so deeply affected by racism in our country. Listening...and responding. We are all in this work together...it is an incredible walk...and I thank you...and I thank God, for your loving hearts! Get it? Got it. Good! Amen.