



“Invisible? Or Invisible No More”

Text: Matthew 25:31-26

a sermon by the Rev. Anna von Winckler

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

I want to start this morning by showing you this picture. Do you recognize it? It is a picture of the statue of Martin Luther King, Jr. that stands in Washington DC. We recently celebrated his birthday. For those of you not retired, it was a day off from work. A statue and a holiday is how we honor this great man. A week ago I attended a Matthew 25 conference. One speaker said that the way we honor great men when they pass is to build statues of them, but in reality the way to truly honor someone is to continue on with their work.

When MLK was alive he fought for civil rights. He fought for integration of black children into then whites only schools, for voting rights, for the right to be recognized as fully human, to be able to live as equals with white people, to be granted the same opportunities and privileges. At that time he inspired many, including many white people, to join in the fight for civil rights. Protests happened. Marches happened. Sit-ins happened. And we know that his life and his work made a difference. Changes came. Laws were enacted. But we know that full equality was never achieved. We still have racism. If anything, we find ourselves going backwards these days as rights of all minority groups seem to be challenged and are, in many ways, being denied.

When I first saw the Ministry Information Form for this church, it said that this was a Matthew 25 church. When I came I found that it was a dream of Kevin’s for this church to become a Matthew 25 church, but that reality had not yet happened. And so, inspired by the words of so many excellent teachers and preachers at this conference, and also by the challenge by BRIDGE to preach and teach on social justice, I will be preaching for the next few weeks on Matthew 25 and lessons that I learned there. Not just lessons, but the challenge and opportunity to live out Christ’s teaching of Matthew 25 in a more dynamic and faithful way. The Lenten Bible Study will also focus on Matthew 25 and I hope many of you will attend. I plan to offer it several times in the week so all will have the opportunity to attend.

But going back to Kevin, I hope that in the end you will want to complete his vision of becoming a Matthew 25 and embrace the work the PC(USA) has embarked upon with this initiative. There is no set thing that a church has to do to become a Matthew 25 church. I think that the main thing is that the church mainly understands what is being asked by the denomination; what the hope and dream is for the work of Matthew 25 churches to participate in. It is going beyond putting a band-aid on the problem which churches have been doing for so long. Helping out here. Giving money there. But what the Matthew 25 goal is to make systemic changes to man-made institutions that oppress and hold down certain groups of people. And I say man-made, because, am I right ladies? These systems have always been put in place by men in power. And enforced by men who want to stay in power.

So for today I would like us to focus on the goats in this parable. I was hungry and you did not feed me. I was in prison and you did not visit me. I was sick and you did not help me. And the goats replied, "When did we see you hungry or sick? When did we see you in prison and did not visit you?"

I've talked before about how we are at times like the goats, we don't see the needs of those who are struggling. We close our eyes to their suffering. I'm sure there are some of you, perhaps most of you, who are saying, "I don't close my eyes to the suffering in the world." But don't you? The majority of churches do just as you do. Well intentioned, you write the checks to support the agencies that are working with the poor, with the disenfranchised. You have been helping at UCM serving meals once a month. The money is needed and the food is appreciated. I want you to hear that. Money is always needed to provide services and we need to support food ministries because there is so much food insecurity in this country and in this world, but the Matthew 25 Initiative is a call for us to do so much more.

The last speaker of the conference was a Palestinian educator. He started a university in Bethlehem and had just finished building a satellite branch in Gaza when the war started. His school was destroyed in the bombings, but more than that, was the concern over the devastation to human lives. He said that a friend of his was sheltering in the Greek Orthodox Church when it was bombed. Hearing the news, he called his friend's number, not knowing if he would answer or if it would forever remain silent. His friend did answer. He was okay, despite the fact that a couple dozen people had been killed. Dr. Rahib told his friend he would be praying for everyone there. When he said that, his friend responded, "Oh you need to tell the Sister that." There was a nun with him. He put Dr. Rahib on the phone who repeated his pledge to pray for them. That comment got this response from the nun: "We don't need prayers. We need feet on the street. We need protests and marches. We need people shouting about the injustice, about the people being killed. We need you to make noise so that they world will see us and know what is happening to us so that they will step in and help stop the killing."

First, the nun wanted to be seen. And then she wanted action. There is always a place for prayer, but prayer needs to be accompanied by action.

Dr. Rahib told another story. He said that an American Lutheran Pastor friend had brought a group to Jerusalem earlier this year. They had a Palestinian tour guide. Bethlehem now has a wall around it. When they came to the entrance of Bethlehem the guide had the bus driver stop and the guide talked about the wall and how devastating it was to the people and how restrictive it was to their being able to live out their lives. The Lutheran pastor was outraged and complained to Dr. Rahib that his church people had not come to Jerusalem to hear about politics, but to hear about Jesus. Dr. Rahib went on to say that this pastor wanted the tour to focus solely on following in the footsteps of Jesus and definitely not about Palestinian-Israeli politics; but to walk in the footsteps of Jesus is going about the business of calling out sin - calling out religious and political leaders who are abusing the poor, abusing the occupied peoples. Jesus was about working to bring liberation to those who were oppressed. Isn't that what walking in Jesus' footsteps is all about? And wouldn't that include the Palestinians whose lives had become restricted by walls?. The Palestinians who in many ways are living in apartheid.

This is the work that MLK was about. What Gandhi was about. What Nelson Mandela was about. What Dietrich Bonhoeffer was about. They all walked in Jesus' footsteps the way we are supposed to walk in his footsteps - by moving, taking action.

But why don't we commit more to working on alleviating the suffering of others? Is it because we don't really believe that change is possible? Or that one lone person can't make a difference? Yet we know that is not true. And we also know that by coming together, by putting boots to the ground, making noise, that we can make a difference. That's what those protestors in the sixties who stood with King did. All those people who put their time, energy, even their lives at risk to bring about change, who leaned into the work. They made a difference.

So what is the Matthew 25 Initiative? What is the hope and dream of our national office to be putting so much effort and attention into this initiative? First, I want to say that this initiative started as a discussion among church leaders in a Presbytery in either Oregon or Washington State. I can't remember which. They then presented their ideas to the General Assembly and this is what has developed. It was exciting to see so many churches from all across the nation participating in and excited about the work and the goals of the PC(USA) around this initiative. Learning what it means to be part of a connective church system to join hands in collectively speaking out, making noise, working to eradicate poverty and to put an end to racism, both of which are human made. If humans can create poverty and institute racism, then we Christian can work to end it. Together. Walking hand in hand. Walking in the love and the power of God's Spirit.

There is one pastor, and I don't recall his name, but he is now an influential pastor. He told this story. When he was young he had to sit near the front of the church. His father was the pastor and his mother was up in the balcony singing in the choir. When he got into Middle School and had more freedom, he moved back to the middle of the church. By high school he was sitting in the last pew in the church. When he hit 18 he was out the door and didn't think he would ever return. He said that the reason he left was because he didn't see the church doing anything meaningful. All this talk of love for one another and yet he heard people talk unkindly of one another and didn't see them doing anything to make a difference in the lives of all those hurting folk that Jesus came to help.

Eventually he met God and returned to the church, but he didn't want his church to be like the churches he grew up in. He wanted his church to be following in Jesus' footsteps, walking to not just change lives, but to change systems, shake things up as Jesus did. I think that, more than anything else this is why the mainline churches are seeing a decline. People want to be part of something that is making a difference and they don't see that happening in the churches.

I often hear that faith is a private matter, but it never was meant to be that. It wasn't private for Jesus. He asserted God's will through all of his words and actions - healing the sick, challenging authority, going against the religious norms of the time. We American Christians are good hearted and well intentioned. We write our checks and the money is so needed to meet the many needs in this world. But as that Nun in Gaza said, right now they need feet on the ground, not knees on the ground. They don't need quiet prayers to God, but loud protestations in God's name for a cease fire. They need voices rising up saying that Palestinian lives matter. That's why I push for this church to embrace global mission, not just by your dollars, but by knowing what your dollars are going to and how it is making a difference and what those missionaries or countries are in need of that we can pray specifically for them but also we can offer help in ways that we don't yet know of, but would know if we had a direct relationship. What do our friends, our brothers and sisters in Christ near and far need? They need feet on the ground marching in protest as Martin Luther King, Jr did. We need to be saying, "We will not tolerate apartheid and war in Gaza, endless war in Ukraine and in so many other countries. We will not tolerate racism and prejudice not in this country, nor in Myanmar, or China. We will not accept systemic poverty forced upon the indigenous peoples here and abroad. We will not accept oppression by our settler colonialist forbearers. We cannot change everything. But together with our brothers and sisters of this country and around the world, we can make a difference if we lean into the work that needs to be done. That is the hope, the prayer, and the goal of the Matthew 25 Initiative. Amen.