

“FOLLOWING JESUS CHRIST”

Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46

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Jesus makes it sound so simple. See a hungry person, feed a hungry person. See a thirsty person, give him something to drink. See a stranger, welcome her. See someone ill-clad, clothe them. Take care of the sick that you see. Visit prisoners. It's just a matter of opening your eyes. Followers of Jesus... see Jesus everywhere. Right? Not exactly. The sheep are as clueless about having helped as the goats are about not helping. Neither are aware of having encountered Jesus.

I've always thought that it was important how we see people, that we somehow needed to see Jesus in others. But if we're honest, it's hard to see Jesus in most people. Someone cuts you off in traffic, embarrasses you in public, criticizes you behind your back. People who don't share your values or opinions. Friends who disappoint or lie to you.

Of course, these people aren't in the list of those with whom Jesus identifies. We don't often see the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the imprisoned. We see plenty of strangers, but keep the interactions to a minimum. The sick that we know and tend to are mostly family and friends. Others we leave to the professionals. In fact, we have mostly outsourced these needs to the professionals: soup kitchens, prison ministries, doctors and nurses, social services.

The result of this managed care system is that those with the needs described by Jesus are mostly hidden from our eyes. So unless we avail ourselves of the sources of information out there or work in the industry, we don't know how many people we house in prisons, how long their sentences are, the nature of their offenses. We don't know about the price paid by prisoners for an inadequate healthcare system leading to loss of limb, ability, even life. We don't know about inequities in the criminal justice system that put the wrong people behind bars, that deliver harsher sentences to the poor.

Jesus makes it sound simple, but it isn't really. We know something of the impact on a child whose parent is incarcerated, but will we be among the sheep for buying a child a present through the Angel Tree program or a goat for failing to respond to the larger problem? Is it enough to provide a warm place for a few hours for the unhoused, or is Jesus expecting more from his followers? Is it enough to donate food and time to Loaves and Fishes and to participate in Bread for the World offering of letters or should we be doing something more for the hungry? It hardly seems fair that "inheriting the kingdom" depends on feeding the hungry hidden from us by a care management system designed to minimize the problem. When it comes to the common good, it's so hard to know whether you're helping or hindering.

Following Jesus Christ isn't about seeing Jesus in others. This doesn't mean that we shouldn't try to see Jesus or that we shouldn't relate to others as though they were Jesus.

We are all children of God and if we don't begin with that assumption, we will never overcome the barriers that divide us. We will inevitably use the differences to separate us. But following doesn't depend on seeing.

Following is about doing. It is about feeding, giving drink, clothing, welcoming, visiting, and healing. Both sheep and goats see the hungry. Neither recognizes Jesus. The sheep feed them. The goats do not. Sounds simple... again?

But followers feeding people will not solve hunger. It will not suddenly produce an adequate potable water supply. Visiting prisoners will not address the inequities and corruption rampant in the system. Welcoming the stranger will not change immigration policy. Jesus said it himself. "The poor you will have with you always."

Some have said that faith, that following Jesus isn't about success; it's about integrity. There's some truth to that. But I think there's more to the doing than faithfulness or loyalty to the cause. I don't think Jesus intends our feeding of others to be ineffective. Jesus tells the disciples to feed the crowd despite having inadequate resources. It isn't a miracle as much as it's a demonstration of how things work in God's kingdom. The hungry are fed!

As Jesus begins his ministry, he announces that the "kingdom of God is at hand." To the sheep, the king says, "Inherit the kingdom." Where Christ is king, the hungry are fed, the thirsty are given drink. This is not a story about who gets into heaven and who does not. It's a declaration that where the naked are clothed, there you will find Jesus Christ. Where the stranger is welcomed, God is present.

It doesn't depend on seeing, but on doing... sort of. It doesn't depend on individual doing. Addressing these issues requires the commitment of nations. The nations are brought before the king. The nations are judged. Those who fed their hungry are received into the kingdom.

On Christ the King Sunday, we emphasize that this is God's world where there are consequences for the nations who choose to hide their hungry, who imprison their "enemies", who refuse to give aid to the refugee. This story is bigger than you and me. It sets a standard that few countries live up to. The Roman Empire in Jesus' day would certainly have been numbered among the goats. The faith community would have found comfort in the assertion that things would not continue the same way with Christ as king. And as followers of Jesus, they would have found challenge in the agenda set forth for God's world.

The faith community was not wealthy. Among them would have been the poor who lacked adequate food and water. There would have been the sick without access to good medical care. We know that quite a few spent time in prisons. Providing for the needs of one another would have been central to their ministries. Hospitality was encouraged by its leaders and practiced in its local communities. These were the concerns of Jesus whom they followed.

It's more complicated for us, enmeshed as we are in both a faith community that values these things and in a nation that is at many times and many ways indifferent to the cries of the poor. Certainly there are organizations in place to address these concerns, but they are almost all underfunded and understaffed. There are commonly held views that shame the poor, that vilify immigrants. Our lives are so busy, our neighborhoods so separated by social and economic class, that the poor are indeed hidden away. Very few of us belong to the categories described by Jesus.

The doing, for us, requires seeing. We need to understand the systems that hold people in poverty. There are conversations taking place in Lansing and Washington that will impact the hungry, the sick, the imprisoned, and the stranger... for better or worse. Turning a blind eye will not make us effective doers.

We probably won't solve hunger or homelessness, but each person we feed or shelter matters. This is what we're about as a faith community. It's what we mean when we say, we are followers of Jesus Christ. In truth, in following Jesus Christ, we intend to live a whole life in response to God, attentively, together, engaging the world, for the good of all.

That's not a simple thing, but it's part of living in God's world where Christ is King. The journey will require courage, insight, compassion, faith, love, and a whole lot of help from the rest of the flock. Amen.