

The Best Way to Serve God

Matthew 25:31-46

[Notes: We use a projection system during worship. Throughout this sermon you'll see the notes we use to communicate with the media team.]

Several years ago in Mississippi, a medical doctor taught a Red Cross course ***[slide: Red Cross logo]*** in emergency medical assistance to a group of women at the First United Methodist Church. They spent many weeks learning various methods of first aid. One evening, after many weeks of classes, a serious accident occurred in front of the home of one of the women taking the class. At the next meeting the woman told the doctor how grateful she was for the Red Cross class. She told him all about the accident. “It was horrible,” she said. “There was blood on the street, bruised bodies, and broken bones. I was so glad to have had your course on emergency medical assistance.” The proud doctor said, “Then you were able to use what I taught you?” “Oh, yes,” she replied. “I put my head between my legs and breathed deeply and didn’t even feel like I was going to faint.” ***[end slide]***

When I heard that story, I immediately thought about the church. We talk about ministry to hurting people. We even train people for ministry, but in the end we do little ministry. Mostly we take care of ourselves, we meet the needs of our members, but we don’t do a lot for people beyond our membership.

Years ago, when I was a denominational worker in another denomination, I served as an interim pastor for a church in Middle Tennessee. During a business meeting a motion was made for the church to begin an AA program. ***[slide of AA logo]*** The church had several people struggling with alcohol, and they knew of many in the community who could benefit from the program. They had a qualified leader to direct the program and a group of people who were ready to participate. They wanted to meet in the fellowship hall on Monday nights. The argument was made that this would be a good way to show the community that this church cared about real problems and to offer a significant ministry to the community. I felt sure the motion was going to pass. However, a longtime member stood and asked, “Will people be smoking in these meetings?” The answer was yes, some AA members smoked—some found it a needed crutch to stop drinking. Well, that opened a big debate. The end

result was that the motion failed, and the church lost an opportunity to be of service to hurting people both in their church and community. **[end slide]**

It wasn't a bad church. But it was a church with no vision of ministry and service. A church that was more concerned about cigarette smoke in the fellowship hall than reaching out to hurting people. And I might add, it was also a church that has been declining for twenty years and continues to decline. They take good care of their own members, but they care little about the needs in their community. Sadly, that is typical among American churches.

The gospel demands that we engage in service and ministry to the people around us. Jesus instructed us to get our hands dirty in compassionate service to humanity. Today's passage in Matthew 25 makes that clear. Please read these words of Jesus with me from Matthew 25: ***["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, 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" (Matt. 25:35-36 NIV).]***

You don't have to be a theologian to understand the point of this text. Jesus is telling us that the best way to love and serve God is to minister to other people. One of the great tasks of the church, therefore, is to do ministry in Jesus name. An important part of our business here is to care about hurting people. Why? Because that's the Jesus way. He spent his life meeting people's needs, and he calls us to follow his example. **[end slide]**

We do that in many ways. For example, when we pay our apportionments, we are part of doing ministry all over the world, including Tennessee—feeding people, teaching them to farm, educating them, helping them with housing, providing health care, and on and on. The United Methodist Church takes seriously these words of Jesus in Matthew 25, and I'm proud of our ministry efforts. Each local church must also do its part. Our church is engaged in various kinds of ministry to our community like Habitat for Humanity, HomeSafe, Brooks House, The Counseling Center, and The Community Help Center. I hope we will do even more local ministry in the future. But this passage isn't just about denominational work or local church projects. It's also an individual call for each of us to minister to others in our daily life. Christ calls us to care for people as part of our daily lifestyle.

The point of this parable in Matthew 25 is crystal clear: the best way to serve God is to serve others. That's a remarkable thought. The best way to serve God is to serve others. Please repeat that with me, "The best way to serve God is to serve others."

Let me tell you a story. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Jews were expelled from Spain. Many went to France, Germany, Greece, and some went to the Holy Land. Among them was Jacoby, a shoemaker by trade. Jacoby was a kind man, but most of all, Jacoby was a devout man. He went to the synagogue every Sabbath and listened to what the rabbi was saying, even though Jacoby spoke Spanish and the rabbi spoke Hebrew.

One Sabbath, the rabbi mentioned in his sermon how at one time twelve loaves of bread were offered to God. Jacoby heard and understood the words bread and God, and he got excited. He ran home and said to his wife, "Esperanza! Guess what? God eats bread! And you are the best baker in the whole country! This week make your best bread, and I'll bring it to God."

That week Esperanza kneaded in the best ingredients and braided the dough with such love. Jacoby then took the twelve loaves of bread to the synagogue.

"Senior Dios," Jacoby said to God. "I've got your bread. You will love it. My wife Esperanza, she's a wonderful baker! You'll eat every crumb!" Then Jacoby took the bread and put it into the holy ark.

No sooner did Jacoby leave than in came the shammes, the man who cleans up the synagogue. "Lord, you know I want to be here in this holy place; that's all I want to do. But for seven weeks now I haven't been paid. Lord, I need for you to make me a miracle. I believe you're going to; maybe you have done it already. Maybe I'll open the holy ark, and there will be my miracle." He walked to the ark and he opened it, and there was his miracle. Twelve loaves of bread! Enough for the whole week.

The next day, when the rabbi opened up the ark and Jacoby and Esperanza saw that the bread was gone, you should have seen the look of love that passed between them. The next week it was the same. And the week after. This went on for months. The shammes learned to have faith in God, but if he hung around the synagogue or came too early, there was no miracle. And so, thirty years went by.

Now an old man, Jacoby came one day to the synagogue with his loaves of bread. “Senior Dios,” he prayed, “I know your bread’s been lumpy lately. Esperanza’s arthritis—maybe you could do something? You’ll eat better!”

He put the bread in the ark and started to leave when suddenly the Rabbi grabbed him. “What are you doing?” the rabbi demanded.

“I’m bringing God his bread,” Jacoby replied. “God doesn’t eat bread!” said the rabbi. Jacoby said, “He’s been eating Esperanza’s bread for thirty years.”

The two men heard a noise, and they hid. From their hiding place, they watched the shammes come in. “I hate to bring it up, Lord, but you know your bread’s been lumpy lately. Maybe you could talk to an angel.” When the shammes reached into the ark for the loaves of bread, the rabbi jumped out and grabbed him. The rabbi angrily told the two men that what they were doing was sinful, going on and on, and all three men began to cry. Jacoby began to cry because he only wanted to do good. The rabbi cried because all this happened because of his sermon thirty years ago. And the shammes cried because he realized there would be no more bread.

Suddenly they heard laughter from the corner. They turned and saw the great mystic, Rabbi Isaac. Shaking his head and laughing, Rabbi Isaac said, “No Rabbi, these men are not sinful. These men are devout! You should know that God has never had more pleasure than watching what goes on in your synagogue. On the Sabbath he sits with his angels, and they laugh, watching this man bring the bread and the other man take the bread, while God gets all the credit! You must beg forgiveness of these men, Rabbi.”

Rabbi Isaac looked at Jacoby and said, “Jacoby, you must do something even more difficult. You must now bring your bread directly to the shammes, and when you do, you must believe with perfect faith that it is the same as giving it to God.”

“You must believe with perfect faith that it is the same as giving it to God.” Sounds a lot like another rabbi named Jesus who said, “To the extent that you did it unto the least of these, you did it unto me.”

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