

SERMON FOR SUNDAY 6th Sept 2015

St John's, Bucklands Beach

Rev Diane Miller-Keeley

READINGS: Psalm 146

1 John 4:16-21

Matthew 25:31-45

That passage from Matthew is one of the most familiar of the Gospel narratives, known even by the most surprising people. I remember when I worked at the City Mission I was approached by a man I knew pretty well for some money which I refused to give as I knew perfectly well that the actual recipient would be the pub down the road. Not long after that exchange, I was shopping in a central city store when this gentleman saw me and, still smarting at my refusal, followed me all round the store quoting this particular Bible passage at the top of his voice and accusing me of being anything but a Christian, while I continued to shop looking as elaborately casual as I could and making my way to the nearest exit! He was very aware of how this passage applied to me; I'm not sure that he ever entertained the possibility that it might also apply to him!

Familiar as it is, this Gospel still carries a punch whenever we hear it. I wonder, what does it do to you? What do you feel when you hear these familiar words?

For me there is always a mixture of feelings and they happen simultaneously. Always I feel challenged to "up my game" in the business of caring. Always I'm aware of how intricately woven together are the themes of loving God and loving the vulnerable so that they are actually inseparable. And that always brings a pang or two or three of guilt as my claim to do one and my failure to do the other hit home.

Let's look at those three reactions separately.

Firstly let's look at the feeling of needing to "up ones game" in the business of caring. One of the interesting things about this passage is that the acts of caring that are named are not spectacular. There is nothing heroic about giving someone a drink of water, or a plate of food,

or a piece of clothing, or tucking them up in bed when they're sick, or visiting someone in prison, whether that prison is literal or figurative – hospitals and rest homes can feel like prisons. They are all ordinary, basic, manageable actions.

So why are they being made a special point of here? I wonder whether the special point is, that those who did these acts of kindness did so quite unconsciously as part of their everyday lives – “When did we see you hungry” etc . They were not aware of having done anything noteworthy. They had simply developed a life style that included thoughtfulness, unselfishness and awareness out of which actions flowed.

On the other hand those that were lambasted for not doing these simple acts were equally astonished - “When did we see you naked etc and did not take care of you?” The life style they had developed was one where self was central, and acts of caring engaged in only if there was some requirement to do so and some reward.

The feeling that we need to “up our game” seems therefore to be an inappropriate feeling. To add more acts of caring to our list, be more dedicated in our service, seems to smack of a conscious effort to gain brownie points, the very thing that is condemned. Yet maybe we do need to “up our game” in a different way.

A constant theme in the teaching of Jesus was to “love your neighbour as yourself”. This was not a call to a rejection of self but a call to value others equally and therefore have the capacity to put oneself in their place. When self is no longer at the centre of our lives but is replaced by an acute awareness of others, then acts of care and concern are a natural consequence.

But how do we develop this outlook? With a society that is focussed on “me, me, me”, how do we move out of this mind-set? Perhaps this is where consciously “upping our game” comes in. Just as mind-set alters behaviour so behaviour can alter mind-set. We **do** need to strive to be better carers, less self-centred beings, more aware and responsive to others and we know all too well that it doesn't happen automatically. We

are so much part of the culture that puts self at the centre that it takes a concerted effort to think and act differently. By consciously undertaking acts of generosity and care, we can influence how we think until we reach the point where such actions become a way of life, not conscious decisions. In the Gospel narrative those condemned had no desire to change. They would have “upped their game” if they had been told had to in order to receive recognition and reward, but their motivation would still have been self-serving. But if the motivation is to change our whole outlook and orientation on life, then “upping our game” is entirely appropriate.

And this brings us to the second feeling this passage raises in me – a renewed awareness of how intricately woven together are the themes of loving God and loving the vulnerable so that they are actually inseparable. “Whenever you do it to the least of these, you do it to me.” Throughout the whole Bible, God makes it clear that the treatment of the most vulnerable is the measuring stick of how closely we are following his ways. Trample the vulnerable and you trample God; care for the widows and the orphans and you are true worshippers of God.

This realization moves us out of the purely individual relationship and into the political. Politics and religion cannot be separated. How we order our society in relation to the care of the vulnerable has implications for our faith. We who profess Christ’s name cannot stand by and see those at the lowest end of the economic scale become more and more marginalized. We cannot be silent when overseas aid to some of the poorest nations on earth is simply cut so that NZ can save money. We must raise our voices when the gap between the rich and the poor becomes the gap between the super-rich and the desperately poor. The words of this Gospel ring out: “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.”

Christ has chosen the lowly and the poor as the earthly locus of his presence; they are his designated representatives so that in serving them one serves the Lord and in not serving them one rejects the Lord.

But it's hard to be as vigilant, as courageous, as aware of what is going on as this requires. We fail; we constantly fail. We fail at the individual level and we fail at the political level.

This brings us to the third response that this Gospel elicits from me – guilt. It's hard not to feel guilty when one hears this Gospel especially with the strong words of judgement that are part of it. In a book called “Good Goats” the authors tell a story about this particular passage.

A few years ago, we presented some of the ideas in this book to a group of retired nuns. One sister raised her hand and said “But what about the story of the sheep and the goats? It says right there that the sheep go to heaven and goats go to hell.” Dennis responded by asking the whole group, “How many of you, even once in your life, have done what Jesus asks and fed a hungry person, clothed a naked person or visited a person in prison?” All the sisters raised their hands. Dennis said, “That’s wonderful! You’re all sheep!” Then he asked, “How many of you, even once in your life, have walked by a hungry person, failed to clothe a naked person, or not visited someone in prison?” Slowly, all the sisters raised their hands. Dennis said, “That’s too bad. You’re all goats.” The sisters looked worried and perplexed. Then suddenly on very old sister’s hand shot up. She blurted out, “I get it! We’re all good goats!”

How true that is. We are complex and contradictory people. God knows and understands the complexity of our beings far better than we do ourselves. All of us have times when we get it right and times when we fail miserably but let's remember those wonderful words in 1 John 4:18: “There is no fear in love ... perfect love casts out fear.” The love God offers us is unconditional, dependent on neither our successes nor our failures. At our best and at our worst we are held within God's love. Passing on that love in acts of care, freely and unconsciously given, is a natural consequence of deep gratitude. We love because God first loved us. Thanks be to God that we are all good goats.