

Sermons at Oak Grove

May 31, 2009

Matthew 5:1-12

*“To Become Fully Human”
By Andries J. Coetzee*

Scripture Readings: Matthew 25: 31 – 46

³¹“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ ³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ ⁴⁰And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ ⁴¹Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴²for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ ⁴⁴Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ ⁴⁵Then he will answer them, ‘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.’ ⁴⁶And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

I apologize to those of you who follow the lectionary and were expecting a sermon on John 15 or Acts 2 this morning. Since today is my last Sunday with you before I depart on a three-month Sabbatical that will take me back to my country of birth, South Africa, I decided to preach from Matthew 25 and share with you more about my sabbatical.

Verses thirty one to forty-six of this Gospel are sacred words to many who see a life of justice, peace, and reconciliation as their ministry. We hear these words in sermons, creeds, and conversation. Even here at Oak Grove Presbyterian Church, our Mission Committee included these words in what we see to be Oak Grove’s calling to the bigger Bloomington Community and to the world.

Reading these gospel words from a position of privilege, they become prayer-like to me. It is a prayer of supplication, asking God to give us the awareness and the sensitivity to see God in those whom our society regards as the least, as the outcast, and then to be

in solidarity with them. This to me is what it means to be truly human, to the likeness of God, it is to have the sensitivity and the awareness to see suffering and oppression and to be willing to be part of an effort to correct what is wrong, or in the words of Micah 6:8: "what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

To be alive Jesus showed us is to live life in fellowship, not only with God, but also with our fellow human beings. In his life on earth Jesus treated **all** people with worth as **all** are created in God's image, whether a Samaritan, a widow, an orphan, a prostitute, or a tax collector. These were all people who were despised and regarded as sub-human with no or very little rights within their society.

In our reading from Matthew then, Jesus tells us that if we see God's image in and do justice for "the least of these," we do it for the sake of the whole of humanity. In this parable, failure to see God's image in "the other" is just as dehumanizing to "us" as it is to "them".

In the context of oppression and discrimination, like we experienced in South Africa, it means that injustice **dehumanizes** the oppressor and the passively complicit bystander as well as the oppressed.

In apartheid South Africa white people grew up with the misbelief that God did not create all people equal. In fact, the culture told us that God set "us" apart and made us smarter, more beautiful and intelligent, gave us more leadership skills and therefore we had to be in charge, live separate and only marry our own. Because of this ideology it was therefore acceptable to oppress those who did not meet certain criteria like the straightness of their hair and the color of their skin, as "they" were not considered human. To sub-humanize "them" even further we called them all sorts of names, that are not acceptable, but it was accepted back then, even during church services from the pulpit.

The majority of white people therefore turned a blind eye to a system which impoverished, oppressed, and violated so many of our fellow South African citizens. Unknowingly to us during that time, is that in the process of dehumanizing others, we lost our own humanity as well.

For me during that time apartheid disturbed the harmony in which God created humanity. A sinful, vicious system dehumanized me and so many of my fellow South Africans as we failed to see Christ in those whom we oppressed.

Since I left South Africa eleven years ago many things have changed and although the country is going through immense growing pains we do see signs of healing from wounds inflicted by the past. This Sabbatical will give me the opportunity to go back and experience some of the healing that has taken place, to face the good and the bad of my country of birth, and in the process continue my own journey in becoming fully human.

For my generation of white South Africans, guilt can become one of the most pacifying forces in our lives; it turns us into ourselves and keeps us from seeking and serving Christ in all persons. What a difference living guilt-free can make in our lives... not living

under the yoke of guilt and judgment, but with the sure bliss of being set free to love, work, and minister! It is then that our Scripture Reading of this morning, to see Christ in the least and the outcast becomes a call to obedience that is not prescription or law or sacrifice, but joyful living in mercy without calculation. It is then that we have the confidence to speak out against all forms of injustice and prejudice that we still face in our society today.

My prayer is that this sabbatical will build my confidence in finding my own voice to fulfill my pastoral leadership in ministry with you. The reality is that it is so easy for us, and I am speaking as a soon to be American citizen, to look at other countries and other people and see their injustice and overlook that of our own. In our self-justification and denial we sometimes fail to see the image of God in those whom we regard as our enemies, illegals, and foreigners. In recent months we saw again the pictures of those we tortured in the escalation of violence after the September 11th attacks on American soil. The reality is that to be aware and to be silent is to be complicit; it is to deny God's image in those we torture and deny basic human rights, and in the process, in ourselves. It is to allow fear and hatred to be our guiding light, instead of the perfect love of Christ that casts out fear.

On this day that we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit, we as Christians claim that we have hope for a better future in which we will be able to live in a society where we can embrace the rich diversity in which God has created us; that we know that God's love and grace is abundant enough for all and that we can speak the truth in love breaking down the barriers that separate and divide.

As Oak Grove Presbyterian Church, we are not perfect, but we trust that God is working in us to help us be the Christian people we are called to be. Because every time, just when we think we've seen the limits of God's love, that love grows. As a community of faith that still builds on its missionary past as a church that is called to minister to all people, we are contributing to a climate of trust and tolerance here in Bloomington.

As a church community we are seeking ways to reflect our changing neighborhood population and address ways in which our neighbors are being discriminated against. We are working closely together with our City, School District and other communities of faith to promote understanding, dialogue, and peace in a time of increasing xenophobia.

I am looking forward to this time set apart for healing, rest, and renewal. I am very thankful to you as a Congregation for your generosity in granting me this time away. I am also looking forward with excitement to return to ministry here at Oak Grove in three months as we continue to grow in love, acceptance, and becoming fully human.

Amen