

Matthew 25 Presentation
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Bev Bliss
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This January I had the privilege of attending the Matthew 25 initiative summit in Atlanta with Pastor Bart and Milissa Carter. There were plenary sessions with great speakers then workshops that we selected that were smaller groups. We shared several meals together and sat with people from around the country. Prior to attending I didn't really know much about the Matthew 25 initiative of the PCUSA only that I have always liked the verse and I agree with making a statement that we as a church support the teachings of this verse.

I have participated in a lot of charity activities throughout my life through church youth groups, and every group I joined in my childhood. I have always liked the idea of knowing I was one of the sheep. I also believe in the idea that helping poor, sick, oppressed, marginalized people is like helping Jesus. I liked that I was in a position of giving my extra time and money to help others and I surely was not one of the "least of these". I have been aware of and sympathetic to the idea that they were mostly in their situations due to the life they were born into, their lack of opportunities, bad breaks, illness, mental illness, and addiction. I had a stable, loving middle class family with lots of opportunities and enriching activities and boosts of inherited wealth with choices on how to spend it and how and where to live my life and pursue my career and interests.

I didn't really know the people I was helping or have real relationships with them. Throughout college and adulthood, I have had more exposure to different people and have now had many experiences of getting to know adversity of people. I have a son who I love and who has been

affected by his chemical dependence and mental health all of his life and is now 36. The challenges and struggles he has had and that my husband and I had raising him as a child and caring for him as an adult have opened my mind and humbled me. I have no judgment left for other families and their efforts to help a loved one, fix them, support, or enable them and sometimes reject and abandon them. Through the course of loving him I have learned about youth and adult homelessness and have gotten to know some of the people who show up for meals, donations, housing and medical care. I have learned about how people live and try to survive outside and unhoused every day of the year. I have been learning about the causes of homelessness and poverty and the way that systems and structures prevent many people from getting into better situations. “Get a job” is not a simple or possible way out for people with no support from family or society and structures that make that difficult.

When my son was 19 and not able to stay in the house for the wellness of the rest of the family, I joined with the other founders of Oasis for Youth in learning about youth homelessness and possible responses to help youth. As a group we discovered that there were many reasons and causes for youth to be denied a safe place to live and be ready and available for school, be able to focus on learning and have the knowledge and maturity to make good life decisions. I was able to see how poverty affected their families and their future and how poverty was related to racism. Oasis began with providing donations and caring adults to build relationships with youth and now uses a model of not only meeting immediate needs but working with youth to eliminate barriers to success and independence for a bright future in addition to joining with other youth providers to advocate at state and national levels for meaningful changes. This demonstrates mercy and justice.

Through my personal experience with my son living in a tent throughout last fall and winter and by working in the donation area at Agate services I have also seen the shortcomings of charity and mercy alone making a real difference. I can give clothes, heaters, blankets, tents then they can be roughly used, rained on, frozen and bulldozed into a dumpster and the need starts over again.

Matthew 25 initiative sets the high goal of eradicating poverty and dismantling systemic racism. A better understanding of Jesus words about helping people who are hungry, thirsty, naked, in prison and sick is not so they will be temporarily more comfortable in their dire situation. It is that we, as a family with all of creation, who have the power and means to fight and change systems of oppression and exploitation, through the love of God, do everything we can with all the means we have to bring meaningful and lasting change. One of my sons who has worked in nonprofits pointed out that organizations only set goals that are achievable and measurable. That is certainly true of a corporation but we are the body of Christ, so I applaud and stand behind this Matthew 25 initiative. We are people of faith in the God of all and God of creation. We can and should state that we want all people to be free, healthy, clothed and fed and able to pursue their purpose.

It is easy to be overwhelmed with the suffering of people near and far. Sometimes I feel hopeless and sad. Having heard the speakers, attended workshops, and heard stories of action of churches around the country, I have a lot to think about. I hope to talk and pray with others in this community and other neighboring churches about how to bring forth charity and justice with the hope that increasing justice will lead to less need for charity.

Christ called us as a body to use our gifts. They will be different for all of us. But as people of faith, we are expected to want the best for all of creation. We can't be complacent and comfortable or scared and prideful but ask God how we can love everyone and bring the kingdom of heaven to earth. On March 20, this introvert is participating in homeless day on the hill for the first time. I'm sharing this for accountability that I will actually do this and speak up to my legislators to try to bring justice in housing opportunities for all.

Martin Luther King uses the story that we know of the Good Samaritan to talk about Charity and Justice and the difference.

“A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. On the one hand we are called to play the good Samaritan on life's roadside; but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it is not haphazard and superficial. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.”