

Matthew 25 Summary
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
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The first, of what the Presbyterian Missions Agency hopes to be many, Matthew 25 summit was a mix of learning and emotions. During the three days focusing on how to dismantle structural racism and eradicate systemic poverty, I experienced sorrow and joy, I learned some detailed instructions, and also how to be more creative and lean into wonder. I heard both realism and hope.

The plenary speakers, preachers, and classroom teachers all brought a different lens to the systems work required of us all as put forth in Matthew 25. There were so many nuggets to reflect on, all culminating in a singular message that this work is big, AND we can do it. I would like to share with you a few reflections from our time there.

Rev. Hodari Williams, whose home church we were congregating in for those three days, started us off with sharing the Zulu greeting of Sawubona, which means I see you. That opening worship and the next couple days we continued to talk about seeing each other. Taking the time to see each other more clearly. To really see each other. We are not one-dimensional individuals tied to a single or even a few demographic categories and identifiers. We are more than the buckets we get put in. We are complex individuals composed of our ancestors' legacies and traumas, our family culture, our lived experiences, our dreams and accomplishments, and our fears and mistakes. We are uniquely us. But do we really see each other? Do we see the fullness of each other? Do we see the fullness of ourselves? Do we see the fullness of our history? Are willing to? An example shared was of Fredrick Douglas, many of us know him as a formerly enslaved man and famous abolitionist who freed

over 400 enslaved Africans through his work with the underground railroad. He was also an enslaver for a period of time; history can be complicated; people can be complicated. We shouldn't stop learning and understanding about all the work Fredrick Douglas did because of this, AND we shouldn't purify his story by removing facts that don't fit a nice, neat narrative of goodness. If we fail to see the fullness of our history, how can we be open to truly seeing the fullness of each other or ourselves today? If we celebrate our history through rose colored glasses without also acknowledging the complexities of individuals, how will we be able to look at each other and acknowledge the complexities of today? I know for myself there are things I struggle with giving up that I know could support dismantling structural racism and eliminating system poverty. While I hope I will not be exiled from this community for those choices of yesterday and today, there are things that I wrestle with, things that give me pause about myself. They are still part of my story, part of the fullness of who I am. I need to see the fullness of who I am, I need you to see the fullness of who I am. When we create images of ourselves and others that are limited to the pretty and proper, removing anything messy or complicated, we lose the ability to imagine what kind of world we could create together because we aren't starting from reality. I believe we are called to hold all of these things, the things we want to celebrate, the things that may make us feel discomfort. To see the fullness of each other, even when it may be messy. Sawubona, I see you.

Another piece that stuck with me was the many conversations about charity and justice being intertwined. In my original, and limited, understanding of the Matthew 25 text, charity was the focus. Giving a drink to someone that was thirsty, clothes to someone without them, caring for someone sick. These are specific acts of kindness that have an immediate impact on people in need. I have always believed in justice,

but charity and justice were two separate things. I read the Matthew 25 text through a very narrow lens as a charity focus only, instead of imagining the full possibility of God's intent which calls us to do BOTH charity AND justice. When we are asked to treat the needs of the people as Holy, it requires us to seek ways to meet the immediate needs of today AND eliminate that need in the future. This BOTH / AND thinking opens the door to creativity and imagination in this complicated reality we live in. When we engage in a conversation about structural racism and talk about supporting communities of color with anti-poverty programs, we also need to be talking about Reparations and Land Back. When we engage in a conversation about systemic poverty, and we are talking about rent support and food shelves, we also need to be talking about unions and living wages. There is a saying that charity is required in the absence of justice. It is a Band-Aid fix for a larger problem. Acts of justice are game changers, and also take great investment and time. There is not an immediate impact or reward, it is at times hard to know if the path you are on is making change. Let us continue our works of charity while creating systems of justice to eliminate the need for charity.

A final nugget that has taken root in me is the unwavering belief that the church is exactly where the conversation and work to dismantle structural racism and eradicate systemic poverty belongs. Dr Yoo, author of What Kind of Christianity, highlighted a book called A Nation That Never Was by Kermitt Roosevelt III. This book highlights that while America desires to live by the aspirational values set forth in the Declaration of Independence, she falls short. A Nation that Never Was. He then asked us to think about our faith tradition, A Christianity that never was? It hit like a gut punch, it felt discouraging, can we as Christians fight to overcome systemic poverty and structural racism? The same systems and structures that we created? Yes, we can believe in

this possibility, because as Bev said, we have faith. We have faith in a God that is bigger than we can ever imagine, a God that taught us to pray that what will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Also, at the summit we were reminded that church has never been solely for religious purposes, churches have served social purposes as well. As fellow parishioners, we are connected by our faith and our relationships with one another grow beyond our Sunday mornings together. Our faith tradition is what brought each of us to Oak Grove, the people are why we choose to stay. We share in welcoming the gift of new life when a little one is born, we celebrate with one another on a new job or home, we are there for each other when we lose someone dear to us, we share meals when life is great and when life is hard. We are friends, we are confidants, we are a family. John Lewis famously said, "If not us, who? If not now, when?" We here at Oak Grove have built a foundation of trust with one another that allows us to get through the tough conversations and the messy times. It may not be easy, but it is possible.

I would like to leave you with this thought shared at the summit that gave me great hope. These complex problems of systemic poverty and structural racism, problems that can at times feel daunting and impossible to solve, are man-made problems. What is the upside to this? Man made problems can be solved with man-made solutions. Let us come together and let God use us to solution a better tomorrow.