

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. Bart Roush
March 17, 2024
Matthew 25:31–46

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God’s Spirit God, source of all light, by your Word you give light to the soul. Pour out on us the spirit of wisdom and understanding that our hearts and minds may be opened. Amen.

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 who 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 brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.’

⁴¹Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You who 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.”

A couple of months ago, near Martin Luther King Jr. Day, Bev Bliss, Milissa Carter, and I travelled to Atlanta, Georgia to attend the first Matthew 25 Summit of the Presbyterian Church. A few years ago, the leadership of the Presbyterian Church started a movement, a vision of congregations engaged in their local communities making a difference, helping the Presbyterian Church be a more relevant presence in the world. Over the next few moments, you will hear from me, Bev, and Milissa about our experience of the summit, some things we have learned, and what that might mean for Oak Grove. I want to start by giving a brief overview of what the Matthew 25 movement is.

The Matthew 25 movement includes almost 1,200 Presbyterian congregations throughout the country. Oak Grove Presbyterian, through prayerful discernment of the Session, committed to being a Matthew 25 church in late 2021. The Matthew 25 focuses on the text we just heard,

the parable of the sheep and goats, in which Jesus makes it clear that what we do matters to God and how we treat others is important to God.

When we welcome others, we welcome Christ; when we bring together people who are divided, we are doing God's reconciling work. We are called to serve Jesus by contributing to the well-being of the most vulnerable in all societies. Jesus is calling us to perform ordinary acts of compassion and justice in daily life. In so doing, we continue Christ's work of proclaiming release to captives and good news to the poor, the good news of God's righteousness, justice, and peace for all.

There are three areas of focus for the Matthew 25 movement.

Congregational Vitality, Dismantling Structural Racism, and Eradicating Systemic Poverty. Let me briefly explain each.

Congregational Vitality might best be marked by a congregation's capacity for purposeful mission. Are church members actively engaged in deepening their faith and is their faith motivated to be actively engaged in the world in a meaningful way. One speaker at the summit named the church's task as helping create and foster mature disciples who are theologically grounded and civically engaged. They bear the light of hope, demonstrating love and mercy, and work faithfully for justice and peace. Vital communities are sustained by personal and congregational patterns and practices of prayer and worship, learning and reflection. Vital communities are stewards of God's abundant gifts in service to God's children in the world. Vital communities follow Jesus into places of injustice and struggle. Which leads us to the next areas of focus.

Dismantling structural racism. Racism is the combination of social power and racial prejudice to create systems that treat people differently, based on their defined racial group. Privileges are provided for some while dehumanizing, excluding, or oppressing others.

Structural racism is the normalizing of racism within institutions and structures. Once racism is structural and institutional, as it is in the United States, it creates ongoing, persistent inequality. Inequality occurs in accessing money, land, housing, education, health, information, and social power. Because inequality is a part of the structures and institutions that we interact with every day, it often goes unquestioned and unchallenged by most of society or the dominant culture. In the United States, structural racism particularly advantages white people while producing negative impacts for people of color.

Racism is a lie about our fellow human beings, because it says that some are less than others. It is also a lie about God, because it falsely claims that God favors some parts of creation over the entirety of creation. Because of our biblical understanding of who God is and what God intends for humanity, the Presbyterian Church stands against, speaks against and works against racism. Anti-racist efforts are not optional for Christians. It is an essential aspect of Christian discipleship. God calls us to reconciliation and to repair that which we've broken.

Eradicating systemic poverty is the third focus of the Matthew 25 movement. Systemic poverty refers to the economic exploitation of people who are poor through laws, policies, practices, and systems that perpetuate their impoverished status. We live in a world where not all have equal access to education, transportation, fresh food, financial resources, clean air, water or healthy environments, employment with a living wage, healthcare, benefits, citizenship, and affordable housing. This lack of access creates generational cycles of poverty. An individual cannot change their economic and social location easily by just "working harder."

There are seven faith assertions that ground the work to end systemic poverty. Just one of them is as follows: “We believe Jesus Christ models how we are to live in community and to confront systems of injustice, including poverty. Jesus Christ taught us to care for the vulnerable, to be a good neighbor, and to provide food to the hungry. Christ came to proclaim good news to the poor. Jesus Christ came not to condemn the world, but to save it.”

There is a phrase that may be familiar to you, and perhaps I have quoted it before. The phrase is that “the task of the church, or the task of preaching, is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.” Now, I recognize that might make some of us in this room or watching online a little nervous. And, friends, it should. Most of us in this room, or watching online, are comfortable. We are part of at least one dominate group and the status quo favors those in dominant groups. Or, to put it another way, most of us in this room have some amount of privilege, some of us, like me, have a lot.

Creating a more just and equitable society messes with the status quo that benefits those with privilege. And when we begin to engage in the work of justice and equity, for those with privilege, it can sometimes be uncomfortable. As one saying goes, “when you’re accustomed to privilege, equality feels like oppression.” Even if you intellectually are on board with the work of justice. Even if it makes sense to you, it can still bring up feelings, lots of feelings.

Some of us may get angry, or sad, or tired. For others it may bring up feelings of guilt or shame. Still for others it may bring about excitement. Some of us may wonder to ourselves, “why do we need to keep talking about these things?” Do we always have to talk about justice? The feelings, all of them, the tiredness, the frustration, all of it is part of the work of justice.

As one speaker at the Matthew 25 summit said, we come from the Protestant movement. And at the heart of the word Protestant, is protest. For the kingdom of God to become a reality – for God’s will to be done here on earth, as it is in heaven – means that we are called into the work of justice. Justice work isn’t about making those with privilege feel guilty, but it is about recognizing where we have responsibility to make things better. The speaker noted that there is “no progress without protest. No discipleship without dissent. No change without confrontation.”

When we follow Jesus, there will be moments that are hard. There will be moments where we have a lot of feelings. There will be times when we disagree. As people with privilege, part of the task of justice is to learn to be comfortable with discomfort. Part of that means communicating in healthy ways. It means being self-reflective. It means being curious about why we are feeling the way we are feeling. It means committing to learn more about ourselves. Please know that my door is always open, and I welcome any conversation about Oak Groves’ commitment to justice. Even difficult conversations.

When Mary, the mother of Jesus, learns that she will bear God into the world, after her initial shock, she sings a song of praise to God. In that song she sings about what God does. The song includes descriptions of how God scatters the proud, brings down the powerful, and lifts up the lowly. She sings about God filling the hungry with good things and sending the rich away empty. This is a preview of what is to come with Jesus. Jesus is amongst those on the margins, Jesus is about righting wrongs and making a more just and equitable world. For those that follow Jesus, this is our task as well.