

**THE IMPERATIVE OF LOVE**  
**November 23, 2008**  
**First Presbyterian Church -- Post, Texas**  
**Matthew 25: 31-46**

Reynolds Price is a professor of English at Duke University who survived a harrowing and painful battle with spinal cancer. His first novel a few years after this life-altering experience is called, **A Whole New Life** and it is about a man, a professor of English, whose only son is dying of AIDS. One night they are talking and trying to connect after a period of estrangement. The father says this:

“If I’ve really seen anything at all in these years, and passed it on, it’s been the realization that the only thing that matters a whit in this life is using your mind and your body, throttle-out for as long as you last, to spark the gaps and hook you to people you need and can give yourself to.”

I believe this to be true and some of what the harsh parable of the sheep and the goats is all about. Our salvation in this world as well as in the next is never dependent upon what we are able to earn, acquire or manage for ourselves. Rather our salvation seems to be

totally dependent upon what we can give of our limited and gifted selves. It is about using our minds and bodies, throttle-out for as long as we last, to spark the gaps and hook us to people we need and to whom we can give something of ourselves.”

On November 12<sup>th</sup>, Hospice of Lubbock had its annual program for bereaved people, entitled, **Getting Through the Holidays**. In the small group I was leading, a man whose wife died a year ago offered us all useful advice for how to live when we are having a difficult time. He said the most helpful thing he learned from his wife’s illness and death is the importance of reaching out to others in need. He said on days when he is filled with great sadness and feeling particularly sorry for himself he calls the American Cancer Society to see if there is anyone in need of a ride to the cancer center for treatment. This grieving and wise gentleman said he feels better and his grief is lessened if he can reach out to someone else who is having a hard time and offer a listening ear or a helping hand. Perhaps we are called to care for the needy, the poor, and the distressed not just for their greater good but also for ours.

A few weeks ago my aunt in Chicago sent me a copy of the poem, “Count That Day Lost” by George Eliot. Aunt Betty June wrote

that this poem was recently read at the funeral of her dear friend as a reminder of what Ruth felt was most important in life.

If you sit down at set of sun and count the acts that you have done,

And counting find one self-denying deed, one word that eased the heart of him who heard;

One glance most kind, that fell like sunshine where it went-  
Then you may count that day well spent.

But if, through all the livelong day, you've cheered no heart  
by yea or nay-

If, through it all you've nothing done that you can trace  
That brought the sunshine to one face-

No act most small that helped some soul and nothing cost-  
Then count that day as worse than lost.

I believe this poem by George Eliot sums up rather well what the parable of the sheep and the goats is all about. Bringing sunshine to one face, doing one self-denying deed or speaking one word that eases the heart of him or her that heard is probably what life is to be about for us who call ourselves Christian.

For centuries, the Christian church has interpreted from the parable of the sheep and the goats that in the final judgment, all will be judged on the basis of how they have treated other people in their midst, especially the needy and distressed. In this parable Jesus took some familiar first-century Palestinian images and used them to teach his hearers something of profound meaning.

In the book, **Stories Jesus Still Tells**, the Episcopal minister, John Claypool, writes, “In that era, sheep and goats ate the same kind of grass, so it was quite common for one shepherd to have both as part of his flock. At sundown, however, all of that changed, for the two species of animals had very different nighttime needs. Goats didn’t have very thick hair, which meant they needed more protection against the chill of the night air. On the other hand, sheep were covered with a heavy coat of wool and could easily spend the night in the open. Goats needed to be taken to shelter each evening while sheep did not.

Another difference was that sheep were much more valuable than goats. Sheep were capable of producing a coat of wool each year that could be sheared and sold, and then after many seasons of that kind of production, the sheep were slaughtered and sold for food. A goat, on the other hand, had much less economic value, their milk

being their only source of producing a profit. It follows from such a distinction that much more attention was paid to sheep than to goats, and the task of separating them from each other at the end of the day was a common procedure.”

Jesus took this familiar pastoral practice and proceeded to use it as an analogy for what was going to happen when the sun goes down on history; that is when the day of our living in time and space draws to a close. In this parable, Jesus told us in advance what was going to matter most in the end. And in my fourteen and a half years of dealing with people who are at the end of their lives, I have found that what matters most in the end is the love and relationships that provide us with a meaningful life all of our days.

Peter Gomes, the minister at Harvard’s Memorial Church says, “When we consider that our time and our talents are the greatest gifts we have, we understand them rightly to be our treasure, that precious cargo we are privileged to bear in this world. In the end, we will be judged not on how much we have but on how wisely and how well we have used our time and our talents. God has great expectations and so too must we!”

In the sobering and unforgettable parable of the sheep and the goats, Jesus seems to be alerting us to the fact that how we choose to live our lives and what we decide to do with our very limited time and precious talents really does make a difference. Our choices impact others on a daily basis and what we do or fail to do is a crucial component in the shaping of our destiny. It isn't the only factor, thank God, but it is a crucial one.

Victor Frankl was an Austrian psychiatrist who survived Auschwitz and then later through his writings, reflected on that experience and what it taught him about human life. In his book entitled, **The Unconscious God**, Victor Frankl wrote:

“The more one forgets oneself by giving oneself to a cause or another person, the more human he or she becomes.”

Frankl and other Holocaust survivors have testified that during their time of imprisonment their only source of life depended on having another person to care about, worry about and give love to. These people who literally spent many days and years clinging to life help us to see that what is even more important than having another person who loves us, is having someone or something that calls

love out of us and is a source of life for us. There are people all around us who have discovered this basic Christian secret:

The man who sits by the bedside of his wife descending into the darkness of Alzheimers and holds her hand and loves her still even though she no longer recognizes him.

The dentist who works every Saturday with the poor who consider dental care a luxury and can never repay him for his services.

The attorney who invests every Thursday evening tutoring children at a community center.

The friend who provides a home for a man dying of AIDS whose family has abandoned him.

The single-mom who works two jobs to provide the bare necessities in this world for her young children.

“Then 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; for 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, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then 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? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me.’”

This parable makes clear that when we care for the least of these in our midst, we are caring for our Lord. When we feed the hungry and cloth the poor and visit the sick and imprisoned, we are actually finding ways to be with our God. In the book, **Gracias!**, the Catholic priest Henri Nouwen says, “Our care for people becomes the way for us to meet the Lord. The more we give, help, support, guide, counsel, and visit, the more we receive, not just similar gifts, but the Lord himself. To go to the poor is to go to the Lord. Living this truth in our daily life makes it possible for us to care for people without conditions, without hesitation, without suspicion, or without the need for immediate rewards.”

John Buchanan tells the story of a couple planning their retirement and working creatively, devotedly and almost incessantly to provide for their youngest child, a young woman, now in her late twenties, with Downs Syndrome. He says, “I think of them trying to find the right living arrangement, with infinite patience, investigation, reading, researching, and interviewing until just the right group home with the most appropriate oversight could be found. I think of them working with public and private agencies to secure meaningful employment, work for pay that is appropriate, doable and necessary. And when all this is in place I think of them addressing the matter of transportation, a simple detail for most of us, but for them, perhaps the toughest hurdle of all. They worry how she will travel daily, by herself, from her home to her job and back again in the evening. Most of all I think of them, taking turns, following the bus on which she is a passenger, on her way to work, on her own now, out in the world, getting on a bus, finding her seat, taking care of her belongings, watching carefully for the correct bus stop. She is secure, but not aware of how secure she is, because one of her parents is in a car following the bus discreetly, without her being aware of it, all the way from the corner bus stop to her place of employment. I think of them doing that morning and night until they know she can do it on her own.”

“And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me.’”

So in this season of thanksgiving may we love all those we need. May we courageously love the least of these; may we freely love those to whom we can give something of our selves. Opportunities come to us every day; opportunities to love and give something of our lives away that we might catch glimpses of God, experience the Holy One in our midst, and continue our journey of salvation.  
AMEN.

## **PASTORAL PRAYER**

Loving and Gracious God,

We gather today to see our friends, to worship You and to be quiet for a brief time while we remember what it is that we truly need in our lives. As we pause this week to eat, to be with loved ones and to give thanks for our many comforts and blessings, we are overwhelmed with how much we have and humbled by the love that continues to empower and heal us.

We hate to admit that how we choose to live our lives and what we decide to do with our very limited time and precious talents really does make a difference. In hindsight, we see how our choices have impacted others and we realize that what we have done or failed to do has been a crucial component in the shaping of our destiny. We seek forgiveness and wisdom from the only true source of life and deep down, we all know that if we want to really live, we have to risk loving others and giving life away. At this time, we hope and we pray that our passion for having and getting and acquiring and achieving, may some day find a peace in our passion for giving, loving and living beyond our limits of security.

O God, because of your generous love to us, may we allow our thankful hearts and blessed lives to be extensions of your light, grace and comfort to those who live in darkness and experience much pain, chaos, and suffering. May we find self-denying deeds

to do that ease hearts and bring sunshine to others in our midst. In our openness to you, O God, may we give thanks that you are, that we are, and that your presence, love and life shall be with us when time itself shall be no more. On this day, at this time, enable us all to be more open, more ready, and more thankful to the God of all life, need, hope, and love. As children of God's promise, let us pray together, "Our Father, who art in heaven..."