

Sermon Text for September 17, 2023

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Proverbs 3:27-30, Matthew 25:31-46

Action

The four brothers received an email from my mom that she and her husband were transitioning from their home in Penney Farms retirement community to assisted living, and it was clear from her email that it wasn't just a simple move. When you make the decision to move from independence to dependence that is not an easy move. I was with my mom this whole past week and my job was to clear out the attic which had accumulated basically a house worth of stuff over the past 12 years. I'm not looking for sympathy but can you imagine a Florida attic without insulation for 9 hours a day. Again, you can choose to feel sorry for me, but I just wanted to share what it was like.

It was great to be with my mom. We ran across so many old family pictures including my grandmother, her mom. There were six siblings in my mother's family, four girls and two boys. All the girls went to Smith College, one became a medical doctor, this was back in the 1920's, my grandmother got her PhD in teaching. Just an incredibly achieving family and they all chose to go onto the mission field. My great aunt, my grandmother's sister who was the medical doctor, married a man from India while she was on the medical field and so they stripped her for her role as a missionary because you were not allowed to marry the natives where you worked.

It got me to thinking about my legacy and what are my kids and my grandkids going to remember about me as they go through our attic in a time in our life when things have changed. It got me to thinking of my time here at FPC and what is going to be the legacy of this church and how will people remember our time together? I have spoken for years now about how I want this church to model its ministry after Matthew 25. I looked back at an old sermon, way back in November of 2011 and I preached on this Scripture and encouraged us to model our church after this Scripture. That's the legacy I want for our work together.

When I served in Palatka we tried pretty hard to create a Matthew 25 church but there were just certain barriers that made it different. When we went back with the youth a couple of years ago the pastor there said we are now doing all the things that you wanted to do when you were here, following Matthew 25. That's what I want people to remember about this church, that we tried to be a Matthew 25 church long before the denomination used this title for certain churches.

Our sermon title has Action bolded, as we continue along in our sermon series on Prayer, Scripture and action. Action as a church ought to push the limits of our insurance liability, we should get letters from the borough to cease and desist because we are heling in a way that shakes things up. Both Scriptures speak today about what we are called to do as followers as we read Scripture, pray without ceasing, and act as if we just don't care. Let's read.

READ

There are a lot of special verses in the Proverbs chapter from which our verses come. Look at vs.5-6 which is not in what we read. These are memory verses that many of you, I guess, had to memorize while you were growing up. The emphasis is trusting in the Lord for all of your actions, and not lean upon how you understand things. Actions based upon a trust in the Lord translates to deferring to the Lord. If we defer to ourselves we will almost always do the safe thing.

One of my favorite lines in the C.S. Lewis' Narnia is when Susan is in Mr. Beaver's house who is telling her about Aslan the great lion, whom we know is actually God. She asks Mr. Beaver: "I'd thought he was a man. Is he – quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion." And Mr. Beaver responded, "who said anything about safe? Of course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the king I tell you." When we rely upon our own understand we understandably gravitate toward safe which often takes us away from the good and from acting according to the will of God, takes us away from righteousness which is all tied in to this understanding of action.

Our actions ought not be marked by what is the safest thing, but what is the goodest thing. Proverbs tells us in vs.27ff that if it is in our power to do good, then we have to do it. It is in our power and the only limitations we have on doing good are the limitations that we place on ourselves. I want to take a minute to talk about Dottie Smith and her understanding of doing good. She understood what it meant to reach out to her neighbor with all of the capacity that she had. She would stand on her feet for hours at Water Street preparing the chickens for the meals. She would spend countless hours making sure that she did good for her neighbor. Her body was devoted to action for the sake of the kingdom.

Dottie wasn't someone who was warm and fuzzy, but she did understand what it meant to do good with your body and with your resources. Her impact and desire to do good is going to be felt for decades both here at First Presbyterian and Water Street and Christ' Home. If we have the capacity to do good, Proverbs tells us, then we should do it. And look around the room, we all have the capacity to do good.

When we get to Matthew 25 we find a parable that is not just a simple gentle suggestion do action which Jesus gives us, but rather a command. The setting is judgment day so it takes away any of the niceties that someone may want to approach it as a suggestion that the Bible gives us to be a good person. No, you are called to action or you will pay the price for your inaction. Not a very nuanced parable and one that we often just focus on how important it is to do good, and not on the reality that it gives us that if we don't love our neighbor there will be eternal repercussions.

As you read this Scripture you will see that we are not given an option, but it has to be a defining character trait of a follower of Jesus Christ. We have been seeing that if you are a follower of Jesus you will read Scripture, pray, and act according to the will of God. It is in this Scripture that the Gospel of righteousness comes full circle. We have defined righteousness as acting according to the will of God. So let's look at this Scripture and see how we are doing as a church, and maybe for us as individuals we can take inventory and see how we are doing in following this command, understanding that it is not an option that God gives us, but a command that God requires of us.

When did we see you hungry, our food bank continues to grow and we have made it a priority as we have remodeled to make sure that it remains a viable and growing ministry. We have over 100 families who use this ministry. When did we see you thirsty, I guess the Well serves as that function as civil servant and others have and will use our well which provides for free drinks and snacks for people to take advantage of. Remember when that whole gaggle of teenage bikers used to come in and use the Well? That's meeting the need for thirsty teenagers. Stranger, we don't ask if you are legal or not when you walk into the doors of this church. An immigrant regardless of their status is welcome in this church, our first priority here is people.

Naked – did you know that we are looking to start a new ministry that deals with clothes? Sick – we still have a dream of setting up a medical consultation space where people who are not able to afford a doctor can come and see a practitioner who can help them before things get out of hand. Prison – we have a ministry to give out care baskets to families whose relatives are in prison. We used to have a prison ministry that was active and a dozen or so of you was involved in that. That is something we could restart.

I say all these things not to pat ourselves on the back or to feel guilty where we fall short, but to remind us that this is the work of the church. When we received the letter from the Borough to cease and desist in creating an emergency shelter for you in conjunction with the LS school district the reason they gave was that providing this service was not the work of the

church. I'm sure that people in the Borough go to church, but what kind of work are they doing if not this type of action?

This parable defines very clearly the problem the goats experienced and it was not that they were doing the wrong thing. It was that they weren't doing anything. The goats ask the question when did we not take care of you? This parable focuses on sins of omission, like Proverbs mentions that we have the capacity to help, and we choose not to help. It is not what did we do that was sinful, but rather what have we not done that is sinful. This is the classic distinction between sins of commission, where you do something, you commit a sin, and sins of omission, where you don't do anything and you should have, so your omission, your lack of action, is a sin in and of itself. We often define sin as our actions, the seven deadly sins are all actions, here it is based upon our inaction.

Our tendency, as we saw earlier, is to be risk averse which will naturally lead us to doing nothing. But within the church there can also be a clear dangerous misunderstanding. It is not just the righteous who ask when did we see you, both the unrighteous are surprised for being called out, because they thought they were doing something. But the righteous were also surprised. It is almost as if the righteous don't feel like they deserve to receive any benefits from what already comes naturally to them. When did we see you, are you sure I did that?

While the unrighteous, well, they probably felt entitled to the kingdom because somewhere in their life they thought they were good. I was golfing the other day and on the tee box next to me there was this guy who was complaining about his daughter not getting into colleges and he said that he felt persecuted. You can imagine a wealthy white male who was a member at a country club saying that they were being persecuted. Those who expect certain things to come their way feel entitled to be the sheep, and when judgment day comes, they will probably be surprised that they are the goats.

It is those who think they are not worthy, that they haven't done enough and want to do more, who don't feel entitled in any way, who are probably the sheep and surprised by their status when judgment day comes. We read in Matthew that when that day comes it is not going to be a separation between Christian and non-Christian, but all of us will be judged. We will be there, all nations will be there, and we will all be on even ground, judged by our Savior. What kind of action are you involved in your life that you know is righteousness, reaching out to the least of these?

Some of us this might be the area that we have to work on the most. We read Scripture, we pray, but we don't really get involved in the type of action that is transforming the lives of the

least of these. Each of us through our time and through our resources are able to do that, but we may not see that as the work of the disciples, of something that is necessary. This Scripture tells us different.

In March we will be having as a church a day of action where each one of you can sign up to do something on that day. If you aren't able to move around and do much physical activity, that is okay, we will have plenty for people to write cards, pray, make phone calls, ways in which to reach out to the least of these in our community and beyond. But before then, I encourage you to be a sheep and just naturally be involved in ways that make the life your neighbor more liveable, in the name of Jesus. Amen.