

Sermon Text for March 3, 2024

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Matthew 25:31-46 ***“Jesus acting among us”***

I think one of the quotes of the weekend that will stick with me was someone describing my brother David as an older more serious Bob. I'm not really sure who got the short end of that stick me or him, but all that took place over the weekend really was as much if not more than what we had hoped and expected. God was at work in a powerful way, but there is always a danger that after this mountain top experience those who were not there will feel left out and left behind. Don't worry, this family is united in all that we do and in all that we share together. The journey that we experience together isn't limited to a single weekend away, we are sharing all of life together.

So now that the retreat is behind us and the primary emphasis on prayer and Scripture is being lived out what remains for us is the action part of our emphasis. We have been looking to increase our prayer and our Scripture and action for the glory of God, and now we still have some work to do with our action. Now, let's be clear, this church is involved in a lot of action. If this church ceased to exist it would be felt not just for our children and youth programs, but also for our social impact on this community as we reach out in concern and love and materially for those who are in the most need. From our food bank to our CIC to a whole variety of opportunities for people to find relief in their time of need.

We learned this weekend that when we talk about Christian social action there are three categories of social action that we should be aware of. There is relief work like our food bank and our CIC, there is development work where you are reaching out trying to remedy the root causes of food insecurity and homelessness, and there is justice where you are involved in work that is inherently political but which looks to make life easier and more just for those who are poor and oppressed. All of these aspects of action are necessary as we follow Jesus, but churches tend to lean into the first, the relief work, because there is no controversy in food banks. But there can be controversy in trying to change a zoning requirement that would allow for a homeless shelter for children in Strasburg. So it is easier and safer to push for relief and let development and justice slide into someone else.

What we find in our Matthew Scripture which is coming up is that Jesus tells his disciples that they are called to righteousness. What is righteousness? It is acting according to the will of God. Both of our Scriptures address the way in which God is acting among us and the

command, not the requirement, not just a wish or desire, but the mandate that we act as Jesus would act. Let's read.

READ

We have looked at Matthew 25 together many times. I'm thinking one of my legacies at this church is that he couldn't get away from Matthew 25, that's all he spoke about. Good, I hope it is. Better than a younger and less wise David. But each time we read it, just like the case with all Scripture, each time we read it, it says something different to us. The passage begins with all nations are gathered together and it is clearly a judgment day reference. God is about to judge the nations, all people. Notice how Jeremiah begins. Look at vs.31, with whom is God making this new covenant? With Israel and Judah. What do these two nations represent? They are the entirety of the people of God.

Matthew is a little different because we don't read that this is the people of God, in fact the word used for nations is *ethne* which more often than not refers to the gentiles or the unbelievers. What we find here is a little bit surprising because what we do not see mentioned at all in this Scripture is the role that faith plays in those gathered. There is no measurement of little or much faith, but rather a surprising measurement of how much or how little, we acted the work of God without us even knowing that God was present among us.

This completely strips away any pretension that we might have as we come to church or as we find ourselves with other people wanting them to know what we have done for the kingdom of God. No one in this story knew that God was acting among them, or even present, and no one in this story is measuring the amount of faith that they have.

The same is true in Jeremiah. What kind of faith do the people need to have in order to be a part of the covenant that is new and is coming? What do the people have to learn in order to receive the blessing of this covenant? Nothing, it is written upon their hearts. This is super controversial because in this one Scripture we find that God is doing all the work and our job, our task, is just to act according to the will of God, or just be righteous.

The sheep are rewarded because they did that which came natural to them. So, this is interesting, if Jeremiah says that we are not going to have to learn what the will of God is, we will just know it, then it is certainly played out in this Scripture. You know what God wants from you. You don't have to learn or be warned to act according to the will of God. You just do it. It is placed already on all of our hearts. If we were honest with ourselves we know what God's will is in our lives, but we do a risk analysis to decide whether we want to do it or not. Do

I have to give too much up, or will people look at me funny or talk about me behind my back because I'm doing the will of God.

Or in regards to justice work, is it considered politically charged so I don't follow up on that which might change things around me for people within my community who are in need. The sin that sends the goats to hell is not the wrong action, it is what? Inaction. It isn't when we don't do the right thing, it is when we do nothing. Esther was faced with this dilemma, this has to be my favorite story in the Bible in regards to this topic of righteousness. She could have easily have said I am not going to approach the king and tell him of the problems we are facing. This was a clear act of justice. But she did, she acted in order to save her people.

Every time that you say when facing a situation: it is what it is, you are saying that there is nothing God can do about it and so there is nothing you are going to do about it. Neither of which is ever true. God can always do something about everything, and so as a result you are never helpless, there is always hope that you are able to change whatever situation you may face. Nothing is what it is unless you decide and choose to do nothing about it.

Last week we celebrated communion together and I hope you all got your cups from Bethlehem, a city which finds itself now embroiled in the midst of a war. This is what we mean when we talk about making decisions about what we address and what we act on. This church has not taken any stances on the Middle East, or formally on abortion, or recently on gender and sexuality issues. I tend to want to stay away from them not because they don't belong in the church, they do, but because I want to focus on that which we do agree on. A food bank may only provide a band aid in a hemorrhaging situation, but at least it is something. I have a Christian perspective on all of these issues and I can tell you they do not follow any party line, they are all over the map. If your positions on what people call politics are the same as any one political party then you are not following Jesus, you are following a political party or a single individual.

I have preached in the past on all of these topics so you know where I stand and I hope and I pray that I stand on the side that Scripture dictates, not my agenda or anyone else's agenda. But when we find ourselves with the table in front of us don't think that it is just a simple table. What we do around this table matters. Last week I said this isn't our table, this is Jesus' table and it would be the epitome of hubris to think that we could in any way shape or form claim this as our table. So how do we act in a way that reflects Jesus in our midst? This table requires that we act as Jesus did.

When you are faced with having to make a decision and someone in front of you is saying something different than what you believe, could you try to treat everyone as if they have more to offer you than what you have to offer them? Think about what that would mean. Jesus asked the Samaritan woman for water, something she could offer to him. When you speak with someone who is on the political spectrum opposite to you, do you approach them and engage them as if they have something that they could offer you? What would it hurt to interact with them in a way that you might learn something from them.

This Matthew 25 Scripture speaks to that. The sacrifice of our savior takes us to a place where those whom we are serving in the food bank, what would it look like if we engaged with them looking to gain something from them rather than thinking that what we have to offer them is more important than anything in that situation. Jesus acts among us in a way that is surprising, when we engage with those in need do we engage with them as if we were the recipients and they were the ones who could teach us, try that out.

Jesus chose to die for us even while we were yet sinners, and our sin did not prevent us from receiving the benefits of His grace and mercy. Thanks be to God.