

**Love Your Neighbor: 4. #Whatever #Whenever**  
**Matthew 25:31-46**  
**January 24, 2021**  
**Pastor Steve Richards**

At a time when so much that is happening in our world is not right, I thought the way for us to begin a new year would be to focus on what is right – to look at how we can be part of the solution in this world. Jesus only gave us one new commandment. On his final night with the disciples, he said this: **I give you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, so you also must love each other.** I don't think he just meant his 12 disciples, but I think he was speaking into future to you and me. It's also the heart of the Greatest Commandment – love God and love your neighbor. At a time when our nation is deeply divided, these words remind us what God calls us to be and to do. To be a bridge. So much of what divides us could be bridged with this one simple word that is oh so difficult to keep at the center of everything we do. This month we've looked at some of the divisions that exist as a result of religious differences and racial differences and last fall we looked at political differences. There's one more I want to mention today and that's the economic divide that exists in our community.

We can't see by looking at each other what our income levels are or the size of our bank accounts or whether we have investments. There were many Sundays when we were able to meet together and I would look at our congregation and see people who give to the food shelf and people who receive from the food shelf and they would be seated next to each other without knowing they were connected through the food shelf. Last week, I spoke with Yvette Giles who is the director of case management at Interfaith Outreach, which provides social service support for people in our community. [video #1] Bridging the gap means getting close enough to each other to know each other's story, to know each other's pain and each other's struggles. And if we can't do that here, where can we? [video #2] Just lend me a hand. Just lend me a hand. Isn't that what we do here?

I want to remind us of something I've shared previously. It's a diagram that I took from Ron Heifetz at Harvard University who teaches about adaptive leadership. He says there is world as it is and the world as it is supposed to be and leaders are the ones who are able to articulate the world as it is and the world as it is supposed to be. Jesus called the world as it is supposed to be the Kingdom of God. And as followers of Jesus, our job is to close the gap. [camera] Jesus cast the vision of a world where people love their neighbor, a world where people are so centered, so powered by love from God and love of God that we can't keep from loving our neighbor.

In today's scripture, Jesus has come to Jerusalem. It is just days before the crucifixion. After teaching outside the Temple, he leaves the city, walks up the Mount of Olives and teaches 3 parables of judgment. What we've heard today is the third and last judgment. **When the Son of Man comes in his majesty and all his angels are with him, he will sit on his majestic throne. All the nations will be gathered in front of him. He will separate them from each other, just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.** This scene is captured by the artist Michelangelo on the wall behind the altar in the Sistine Chapel. This is the Last Judgment. Christ is in the center, sending the sheep to eternal life and the goats to where the demons go. Jesus says to those on his right/sheep: **"Come, you who will receive good things from my Father. Inherit the kingdom that was prepared for you before the world began."** And to those on his left/goats, he says: **"Get away from me, you who will receive terrible things. Go into the unending fire that has been prepared for the devil and his angels."** This is an

unnerving scene. We want to see Jesus healing the sick, caring for the children, feeding the hungry, but he's saying here that there will be a Judgment Day. What's the difference between those who are blessed and those who are cursed? Jesus says to those who are blessed, **"I was hungry and you gave me food to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you gave me clothes to wear. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me."** All of those things are summarized by the statement "Love your neighbor as yourself." But to the goats, Jesus says: **"I was hungry and you didn't give me food to eat. I was thirsty and you didn't give me anything to drink. I was a stranger and you didn't welcome me. I was naked and you didn't give me clothes to wear. I was sick and in prison, and you didn't visit me."**

In the parable, both groups are surprised by the outcome. The sheep are surprised. "Lord, when did we ever see you hungry, naked, sick or imprisoned? When? The sheep had been doing this all along for everybody, and they didn't remember seeing Jesus when they were doing this. And the goats were also surprised. "Lord, we don't remember seeing you, because if we had we would have done all these things for you." And to the blessed, Jesus says: **"I assure you that when you have done it for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you have done it for me."** And to the cursed: **"I assure you that when you haven't done it for one of the least of these, you haven't done it for me."** Some look at "brothers and sisters of mine" and think he's only talking about Christians, followers of Jesus, but I think Jesus has a view that is bigger than that. I think he's talking about everybody. We are concerned for everybody and not just those who think like us, or look like us, or go to this church, or follow Jesus. And how we treat others is something Jesus takes personally.

Many of us have good intentions (myself included) but we get busy or we are focused on our own needs or the needs of our family that we don't see Jesus. Or we look to religion as a way of meeting my own needs – Jesus loves me and I want more of that so I love the Lord my God with all my heart, mind, and soul, but I forget the second part. If you look closely at Michelangelo's painting there's a character that's troubling to me. [slide] Look at his face. Here's someone who thought he was a Christian, and he's shocked and frightened. He's being sent away. How did this happen? He knew Jesus, but he failed to understand what Jesus was asking of him. This parable doesn't fit well with Paul's justification by faith. Paul says we are saved by God's grace. We can't earn it. But Jesus isn't talking about earning salvation. He's talking about what kind of person you are and how to live a life of faith.

A parable is a story meant to make a point and that point is meant to grab your heart and move you. The question for each us: Is the world a better place because you were in it? Did you help to close the gap, to bridge the differences? **Am I a sheep or a goat?** Jesus wants us to face the question now. To be sheep means loving your neighbor. It is a dogged determination to bless and to serve others no matter the risk, no matter the cost.

What's that look like? It means living with less so we can give more away, or driving a car that is less expensive, or living in a house that is a little smaller. Creating margin in your life so that you can bless and serve your neighbor. When we received another stimulus check a few weeks ago, we gave thanks that assistance is provided for those who need it the most – and because we didn't need it, we decided to give it to someone who does. Because ultimately it all belongs to God and how does God want me to use what has been entrusted to me. And when we commit ourselves to blessing and serving others, when we connect our lives to a purpose greater than ourselves – we are happier and healthier. We come to light!

I saw this a week ago with six men who delivered furniture to a home in this community that will provide transitional housing for women who are victims of abuse and domestic violence. I saw this when someone sent a check for \$1,000 and a few days later I was contacted by our partner congregation Iglesia Piedra Viva asking if we could provide grocery gift card for families who are hungry and so we delivered 40 gifts cards. Or it's this hallway outside my office that has become a food shelf for families at Bloom experiencing food insecurity. Or it's this photo I received of a computer lab at a school in Sierra Leone as a result of a grant from our Living Ministry Endowment. Or I see it happening when someone retires and then picks up a new calling to serve children or provide leadership in this community to people living on the margins. Over and over and over again, I'm seeing people who recognize the face of Jesus in the needs of others and by becoming the bridge, their own lives come to LIGHT.

Last Wednesday, Amanda Gorman introduced us to her inaugural poem. Let me share just a few lines that fit so well with Jesus' call:

*...one thing is certain:  
If we merge mercy with might,  
and might with right,  
then love becomes our legacy  
and change our children's birthright...  
For there is always light,  
if only we're brave enough to see it  
If only we're brave enough to be it*

When you connect your life with a purpose greater than yourself, when you connect your life with Jesus call to love your neighbor, no matter the risk, no matter the cost – that's when your life comes to LIGHT. May in be so. Amen.

### **Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of January 24, 2021**

**Weekly Prayer:** Mighty and merciful God, we want to be attentive to those who are hungry or thirsty, welcoming to strangers we encounter, caregivers for those who are ill and friend to those who are imprisoned. Forgive us for when we did not recognize you in the face of a stranger and failed to care for those in need. Open our hearts so that we might see one another with your eyes and love as your hands and feet in the world. Amen.

### **Monday, January 25**

#### **Scripture: Luke 10:25-37**

A legal expert stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to gain eternal life?" Jesus replied, "What is written in the Law? How do you interpret it?" He responded, "*You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.*" Jesus said to him, "You have answered correctly. Do this and you will live." But the legal expert wanted to prove that he was right, so he said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. He encountered thieves, who stripped him naked, beat him up, and left him near death. Now it just so happened that a priest was also going down the same road. When he saw the injured man, he crossed over to the other side of the road and went on his way. Likewise, a Levite came by that spot, saw the injured man, and crossed over to the other side of the road and went on his way. A Samaritan, who was on a journey, came to where the man was. But when he saw him, he was moved with compassion. The Samaritan went to him and bandaged his wounds, tending them with oil and wine. Then he placed the wounded man on his own

donkey, took him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day, he took two full days' worth of wages and gave them to the innkeeper. He said, 'Take care of him, and when I return, I will pay you back for any additional costs.' What do you think? Which one of these three was a neighbor to the man who encountered thieves?" Then the legal expert said, "The one who demonstrated mercy toward him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

**Observation:** "Go and do likewise"? Jesus wasn't saying the legal expert (or you) are off the hook as long as you don't ignore a man thieves have beaten and left in a ditch. Jesus' story said the Samaritan's far-reaching mercy cost time, money and emotional energy. He used his resources to relieve another person's suffering. In the story, he wasn't even finished when he got the broken man to an inn—he had to go back and pay the innkeeper. So, Jesus' call—"go and do likewise." Offer extravagant, practical mercy that costs something.

**Application:** Has helping someone else ever cost you a significant amount of money, time, or energy? If so, reflect on your inner responses as you were showing mercy. (Don't hurry—let yourself feel those feelings and thoughts again.) Then recall your inner responses after the crisis when you knew you had helped someone heal. Do you believe giving help when it costs something is worth it?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, place someone in my path who will give me the chance to act like the Samaritan. Teach me that I'm here to help others. And in all the broken places of my life, show me mercy, Jesus. Amen.

**Tuesday, January 26**

**Scripture: Micah 6:6-8**

With what should I approach the LORD and bow down before God on high? Should I come before him with entirely burned offerings, with year-old calves? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with many torrents of oil? Should I give my oldest child for my crime; the fruit of my body for the sin of my spirit? He has told you, human one, what is good and what the LORD requires from you: to do justice, embrace faithful love, and walk humbly with your God.

**Observation:** The prophet Micah spoke to the kingdom of Judah's urge to keep religious ritual and conspicuous consumption side-by-side. On God's behalf, he urged a different agenda: "Do justice, embrace faithful love, and walk humbly with your God." Messiah Church serves the same God as Micah did. One of our strategic goals is to fill gaps that exist in our community. We agree with Micah that pious rituals matter less than simply treating people justly.

**Application:** Micah kept ironically proposing bigger and bigger sacrifices in verses 6-7 to try to please God. He ended with child sacrifice, a ghastly practice among some of Israel's neighbors. What do the three divine requirements Micah listed tell you about what God is like? "To walk" was the Hebrew way to identify a person's lifestyle. In what ways does your lifestyle reflect your choice to "walk humbly" with your God?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, my goal is to walk humbly with you. Lead and guide me into the newness of life that you died and rose again to offer me. Amen.

## Wednesday, January 27

### Scripture: Amos 5:21-24

I hate, I reject your festivals; I don't enjoy your joyous assemblies. If you bring me your entirely burned offerings and gifts of food— I won't be pleased; I won't even look at your offerings of well-fed animals. Take away the noise of your songs; I won't listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

**Observation:** Amos was probably the first of the Hebrew "writing prophets." Sent by God to preach to the northern kingdom of Israel, he observed that many people's outward religiosity had no effect on the way they treated others. On God's behalf, he urged those who profited by exploiting others to stop trusting in showy religious ceremonies, and instead to "let justice roll down like waters."

**Application:** How can you be alert for opportunities in everyday activities like your work, leisure activities, shopping and other pursuits to make choices that bring about righteousness and justice? Amos itemized God's charges against Israel: "They have sold the innocent for silver, and those in need for a pair of sandals. They crush the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way." (Amos 2:6-7). If Amos wrote today, rather than in 700 B.C., what issues do you think he might list for our culture?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, from Minnesota to Kenya and beyond, there are hungry children and desperate people facing injustice. They are all your people—help me to care about them as much as you do. Amen.

## Thursday, January 28

### Scripture: Isaiah 58:2-10; James 2:8, 14-17

They seek me day after day, desiring knowledge of my ways like a nation that acted righteously, that didn't abandon their God. They ask me for righteous judgments, wanting to be close to God. "Why do we fast and you don't see; why afflict ourselves and you don't notice?" Yet on your fast day you do whatever you want, and oppress all your workers. You quarrel and brawl, and then you fast; you hit each other violently with your fists. You shouldn't fast as you are doing today if you want to make your voice heard on high. Is this the kind of fast I choose, a day of self-affliction, of bending one's head like a reed and of lying down in mourning clothing and ashes? Is this what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? Isn't this the fast I choose: releasing wicked restraints, untying the ropes of a yoke, setting free the mistreated, and breaking every yoke? Isn't it sharing your bread with the hungry and bringing the homeless poor into your house, covering the naked when you see them, and not hiding from your own family? Then your light will break out like the dawn, and you will be healed quickly. Your own righteousness will walk before you, and the LORD's glory will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and God will say, "I'm here." If you remove the yoke from among you, the finger-pointing, the wicked speech; if you open your heart to the hungry, and provide abundantly for those who are afflicted, your light will shine in the darkness, and your gloom will be like the noon.

You do well when you really fulfill the royal law found in scripture, *Love your neighbor as yourself.*

My brothers and sisters, what good is it if people say they have faith but do nothing to show it? Claiming to have faith can't save anyone, can it? Imagine a brother or sister who is naked and

never has enough food to eat. What if one of you said, “Go in peace! Stay warm! Have a nice meal!”? What good is it if you don’t actually give them what their body needs? In the same way, faith is dead when it doesn’t result in faithful activity.

**Observation:** Isaiah 58 likely spoke to Israelites returned from exile in Babylon. Too many of them saw the return as a time to resume former practices and they wondered why God didn’t honor their feasts and fasts. Like Amos and Micah 150 years earlier, the prophet said instead of showy, external fasts, they needed to fast from oppressing others. Jesus’ brother James saw that some early Christians had the same spiritual problem. A faith unwilling to actively help struggling people, he wrote, is no faith at all.

**Application:** James wasn’t suggesting a good “balance” between faith and works, as though we need a 50/50 mix of the two. We need 100% of both—100% merciful actions growing out of 100% faith in God’s gracious acceptance of us, for which we show gratitude. What are some of the faithful actions in loving your neighbor(s) you have seen grow in your life as you respond to God’s grace?

**Prayer:** O God, I want to live a life that honors and pleases you. Help me to offer you my heart, my inner being, before I offer you anything else. Guide me today and each day. Amen.

**Friday, January 29**

**Scripture: Matthew 25:31-40**

“Now when the Human One comes in his majesty and all his angels are with him, he will sit on his majestic throne. All the nations will be gathered in front of him. He will separate them from each other, just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right side. But the goats he will put on his left. “Then the king will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who will receive good things from my Father. Inherit the kingdom that was prepared for you before the world began. I was hungry and you gave me food to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you gave me clothes to wear. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me.’ “Then those who are righteous will reply to him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink? When did we see you as a stranger and welcome you, or naked and give you clothes to wear? When did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ “Then the king will reply to them, ‘I assure you that when you have done it for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you have done it for me.’

**Observation:** People who don’t have enough to eat or wear, who can’t afford good (or any) care if they’re sick, who are in prison, who are outsiders in your community – most of us are willing to do a little something to help “them.” Yet, Jesus called people like that “the least of these brothers and sisters of mine.” Joining in Jesus’ work to renew the world means seeing that the poor, the sick, the prisoners, the aliens are not “them” at all. They are “us!” Jesus called us to build a legacy of loving our neighbors, his brothers and sisters, as one human family, caring and sharing the way he did.

**Application:** In Jesus’ story, the “sheep” who helped him were surprised: “When did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink?” They saw need, not a chance for reward. What can help you learn to see in the faces of the people you meet, especially the outcast or hurting, the face of Jesus? When have you felt the freedom and joy that comes from blessing others because you know God cares about them?

**Prayer:** O God, keep my eyes and my heart open to see your face in the faces of hurting people around me who need your touch through me. Amen.

**Saturday, January 30**

**Scripture: Colossians 3:12-14; 1 Corinthians 13:4-7**

Therefore, as God's choice, holy and loved, put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Be tolerant with each other and, if someone has a complaint against anyone, forgive each other. As the Lord forgave you, so also forgive each other. And over all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.

Love is patient, love is kind, it isn't jealous, it doesn't brag, it isn't arrogant, it isn't rude, it doesn't seek its own advantage, it isn't irritable, it doesn't keep a record of complaints, it isn't happy with injustice, but it is happy with the truth. Love puts up with all things, trusts in all things, hopes for all things, endures all things.

**Observation:** In today's readings the apostle Paul said God calls us to be people who live in loving community with our neighbors. Contracts or policies, though some of them are needed, don't make that happen. Loving your neighbor grows naturally as we commit ourselves to living as Jesus' followers, letting him show us who is our neighbor and how to love each neighbor. "Love, which is the perfect bond of unity" is the mighty force that overcomes prejudice, hatred, distrust and all the influences that divide us from one another. "Love your neighbor" reaches well beyond "tolerate your neighbor" to create genuine caring and community, even in places where to human eyes that seemed impossible.

**Application:** Colossians called all of Jesus' followers to show five qualities: "compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience." When have you showed those qualities toward a neighbor, or had a neighbor show those qualities toward you? What other responses might you or they have chosen? Would those alternatives have made things better or worse? Colossians went on to make a sweeping statement in 3:17 about loving your neighbor: "WHATEVER you do, whether in speech or action, do it ALL in the name of the Lord Jesus." How can doing whatever you do in Jesus' name shape your way of life?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, please keep shaping me into a person of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Give me the grace to love as you have loved me. Amen.