

Plugged In to Loving God, Loving Each Other, and Loving the World:

2. Plugged In to Loving the World

Matthew 25:31-40

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If you have a smart phone, you probably know about Facial Recognition. It's a way of recognizing a human face using technology. It uses biometrics to map our facial features from a photograph or video. It compares the information with a database of known faces to find a match. Facial recognition can help verify your identity and give you access to your phone or secured accounts just by scanning your face.

A man named Marty Doerschlag has a superpower that matches that of facial recognition technology. He can remember a face forever. You could call him *The Recognizer!* In an NPR interview, he said, "If I spend about 30 seconds looking at somebody, I will remember their face for years and years and years." Doerschlag realized he had this gift after a series of strange encounters and sightings. One year, he sat behind a man at a Michigan vs. Ohio State football game. Three years later, he recognized the guy in the Dallas-Fort Worth airport. Did he remember the score of the game? No. But he recognized the man. Or at a Las Vegas restaurant, he asked the waiter if he had served customers at a particular restaurant in Columbus, Ohio, many years before. The guy just froze. *The Recognizer* had struck again! The waiter said, "Yeah, you're right."

Scientists have a name for people with exceptional ability to recognize faces: "Super-recognizers." If you never forget a face or can spot the same nameless extras across different television shows and ads, you might be a super-recognizer. But here's the thing. Just as some humans are highly skilled at recognizing faces, most of us fall into the category called "typical recognizers." According to *Neuroscience News*, psychologists have discovered that our ability to recognize faces varies a great deal, kind of like the ability to sing. While a very few of us can sing like Adele, most of us are typical singers. And when it comes to recognizing unfamiliar faces, most of us are typical recognizers.

Scripture tells us that even someone as familiar as Jesus can be hard to recognize at times. On Easter morning, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb, grieving the death of Jesus. When she arrived, she saw that the stone had been removed away. And she stood weeping outside the tomb. Then she turned around and saw a man standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. She was unable to identify him. The man said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?" She was probably wondering who that guy was and why he was talking to her. She figured that he must be the gardener. It wasn't until Jesus called her name that she recognized him. Mary's life was changed by recognizing Jesus. So how can we become super-recognizers and identify Jesus in the world today?

We are in the final week in our message series *Plugged In* where we've been spending time with our mission statement of "Growing disciples by loving God, loving each other and loving the world." This statement shapes who we are and how we do ministry. Today we are going to focus on the last part of this statement and what it means to love the world by seeing Jesus in the world.

Ron Heifetz, an expert on leadership shares a diagram of the world as it is and the world as it is supposed to be. A leader can clearly identify "this is how the world is today" but they are also able to articulate a vision of how the world is supposed to be. The role of a Christian is to close

the gap between how the world is and how it is supposed to be; a world filled with kindness and compassion, mercy and justice, a world where poverty, oppression, injustice and racism no longer exist. We don't live in that world yet, but we have a vision of what that world looks like. Jesus called this the kingdom of God.

And every time we pray the Lord's Prayer... "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven", we are praying for that world to come and not only praying for that world to come but we are offering ourselves up to be part of that transformation through the work of our hands. So, as we consider ways Messiah Church can and should live into that vision, let's consider the parable of the sheep and the goats.

A parable is not meant to be a story about something that is literally going to happen just like it says, word for word. They are stories that are meant to drive home a point. And that point is meant to grab your heart and compel you into action. This parable shares what Jesus will be looking for, the criteria on which we will be judged, at the final judgment. It illustrates what it means to be intentional about caring for other people, so to transform the world around us.

It was a few days before Jesus' crucifixion. He had come to Jerusalem knowing he was going to die. After talking about the Temple's destruction and the end of the world (in sometimes puzzling terms), Jesus gave a word picture of the final judgment. His story about the judgment clearly conveyed his Kingdom's priorities. Kingdom people, he said, care for the hungry and thirsty, the poorly-clothed and strangers, the prisoners and the sick—the people whom Jesus called "the least of these brothers and sisters of mine."

"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." Matthew 25:31-32

In hearing the parable, Jesus' disciples are confused, and maybe a little scared, and so they ask Jesus, "what's the difference between the sheep and the goats?" To the sheep, Jesus says, *"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."* (Matthew 25:35-36) But to the goats he replies, *"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."* (Matthew 25:42-43)

I find it interesting that both groups seem to be surprised by his answer, both those accepted and the ones who were turned away. They expected to meet Jesus in religious, holy places, not in the streets among the needy and poor. But Jesus' story said we should notice all people in need of help and treat them as if it were Jesus himself in need. By using the words, "brother and sister of mine" (some translations say family) Jesus makes it clear that we are to care for everyone, not just those who think and look and vote like us or just those who are or aren't followers of Jesus. We are to be concerned and care for everyone. In fact, this parable tells us that Jesus takes how we treat and care for others personally. Whatever we do or don't do for someone in need, we did or didn't do to God. So, the question to ask yourself is, "am I a sheep or a goat?"

Two weeks ago, we learned that one of the words for love used in the New Testament, agape, is not about a romantic, warm, fuzzy feeling but intentional acts to care for others. Some of you who have been around Messiah Church for a while might remember a sermon series last fall

that outlined 5 essential practices of followers of Jesus, five practices or disciplines that help us grow in your faith. Worship, prayer, study, serving and giving. As we think about the practice of serving others, remember that we looked at the 5 fingers on our hand as a reminder to practice 5 acts of kindness today or this week. It could be an unexpected word of encouragement or appreciation, a larger than usual tip, giving someone else who seems to be in a hurry your place in the line at the grocery store or at the gas pump. In fact, those are the vows of membership for every United Methodist Church.

This past summer in our study of Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, we learned that it is our faith that produces our work and not the other way around. We are saved by God's grace, mercy, and love and not by the work of our hands. There is nothing we can do to earn our salvation; it is purely a gift from God. But salvation is not just about us getting to heaven but working to realize heaven, God's kingdom, here on earth in the here and now. In this parable, Jesus isn't talking about us earning our faith, he is referring to **how our life of faith compels us to respond in love**; a faith that means we live differently than the rest of the world in the way we love our spouses, partners, and family members. It means we are more gracious and patient with our neighbors, colleagues at work and classmates at school. And also, that we respond to a need because when God's heart breaks, God's response is to send us.

This is at the core of what it means to be Methodist. The very first Methodist served the poor, built schools, they collected food for those in need, they established clinics that gave away free medications, they would visit people in prison, they took a stand against slavery and provided places for widows and orphans to live. The very first Methodists showed mercy and care for people wherever they were. They were living out in tangible ways the parable of the sheep and the goats. Do you remember the 3 Simple Rules of Methodism? Do no harm. Do good. Stay in love with God. Caring for others is part of the DNA of what it means to be Methodist, what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ, and what compels us to live out our faith in the world.

So, how can we recognize Jesus in the world around us? He may not be clear at every moment, just as he was not clear to Mary outside the empty tomb but he is present in the power of his resurrection life. He comes to us in people who are strangers, who are hungry and who are sick. When we serve vulnerable people, we become super-recognizers of Jesus in the world today. Let me share a few ways that I see you, Messiah Church, seeing Jesus and responding in love, BEING SHEEP in our world today.

Welcoming a stranger.

This past week, you welcomed into our building and our lives the Native American Course of Study students and professors. Their mission is to educate and train Native American pastors in the United Methodist Church. Around 15 students and professors spent the week learning, praying, worshiping, sharing meals, and building community in preparation to share the love of Jesus in their communities. And Thursday night, in their closing worship service and graduation ceremony, three newly licensed local pastors were commissioned into the UMC. For those from Messiah church who served, and there were many, it was an opportunity to listen and learn about the Native American story from their perspective. Many of these folks we will never see again, but our lives have been changed for the better because you welcomed them in and extended gracious Messiah hospitality.

In 2021, when the Taliban began taking control of Afghanistan, the Afghani people began fleeing their homeland for fear of their lives. In response to this humanitarian crisis, as we had done in 2018 by sponsoring the Agid Family from Kenya, you made the commitment once again to get involved. In January of this year, we sponsored the Amini Family. In all of cases, you

extended welcome to the stranger and pooled your gifts and talents together to care for those who, at the time, so desperately needed it.

Providing food for the hungry and water to the thirsty.

Again, this year, for the 5th year in a row, you are providing snacks to the children at Oakwood School, just across the street. A snack may not seem like a necessity to you but when children come to school hungry or forget their lunch at home or have no lunch to bring to school, they're hungry and hungry kids can't learn. Before we learned of this need, the teachers were purchasing these snacks out of their own pockets. So you are not only supporting kids, you're supporting teachers. Throughout the month of September, our Second Mile Giving will go to buy snacks for the kids.

You may recall that half of our Christmas Eve offering of 2021, over \$15,000, went to provide a well at the Mali Mali Primary School in western Kenya. That project was complete this past June. And we just got word that our second project is now also complete. We were able to co-sponsor another clean water sources for the Mlowa Secondary School in Tanzania. It is a day school for boys and girls with enrollment of 646 students. They too now have access to clean, safe drinking water because of you.

And this is just the tip of the iceberg of what you have done to care for others in this world, Messiah Church. Have I told you lately how proud I am to be one of your pastors? And how excited I am to be a part of visioning for our future and then see what is going to happen in the years to come? To see how God will work through you, using you to change the world as you live out our faith in ways that make this world a better place because you were in it, more like the kingdom of God? Because when we work together, pooling our resources and gifts, we are able to accomplish so much more than any one of us can do by ourselves.

Every time I write a message, it's an opportunity for me to turn the mirror on myself. And as I asked myself this week, am I a sheep or a goat, I realize that over and over again, I will fail to live out that list and so will you. But we keep on trying. It is only by God's grace that we are saved. When we serve children, welcome guests, feed the poor, we are really serving Jesus. When we provide clean water for those without, care for the sick, provide clothing for those who need it, we are really helping Jesus. We can be super-recognizers, whenever we reach out to people in need.

Let's pray: Teach us, Lord, to serve you as you deserve. To give and not to count the cost, to fight and not to heed the wounds, to toil and not to seek rest, to labor and not ask for any reward, except the knowledge that we do your will, though Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. (Prayer of St. Ignatius of Loyola.)

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of September 25, 2022

Weekly Prayer

Lord Jesus, I'm so grateful for your love and forgiveness. Teach me how to seek forgiveness from others, how to offer it even to enemies—and how to do both in healthy ways that heal, rather than just suppress, my pain and hurt. Amen.

Monday, September 26

Scripture: Matthew 10:1-8

He called his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits to throw them out and to heal every disease and every sickness. Here are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, who is called Peter; and Andrew his brother; James the son of Zebedee; and John his

brother; Philip; and Bartholomew; Thomas; and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus; and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean; and Judas, who betrayed Jesus. Jesus sent these twelve out and commanded them, "Don't go among the Gentiles or into a Samaritan city. Go instead to the lost sheep, the people of Israel. As you go, make this announcement: 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those with skin diseases, and throw out demons. You received without having to pay. Therefore, give without demanding payment.

Observation

Matthew provides us with a list of the twelve disciples and in doing so he calls them apostles – a word that means "sent out." Jesus is now sending them, and later would send all those who witnessed the resurrection. Those who are sent have a message tied to actions intended to bring them in contact with hurting people.

Application

Our ability to fulfill Christ's first-century instruction in a twenty-first-century world begins with putting ourselves in the shoes of someone who is in need of cleansing and healing. Where do such needs exist today? What resources has God freely given you so that you can respond?

Prayer

Lord, I come to you at the start of another week, wanting to live in ways that will honor you. You have made me for a purpose. Help me to recognize the ways to love and serve you this week. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Tuesday, September 27

Scripture: Hebrews 13:1-3

Keep loving each other like family. Don't neglect to open up your homes to guests, because by doing this some have been hosts to angels without knowing it. Remember prisoners as if you were in prison with them, and people who are mistreated as if you were in their place.

Observation

Doing the work of justice is being obedient to Jesus' command to love our neighbor in a world of injustice. Doing the work of justice is practicing the command: To love God with our heart, soul and mind, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Justice is doing for others what we would want done for us.

Application

Verse 3 puts the work of justice in the context of love. Can we say that we love our neighbors, if we do not draw near and seek justice on their behalf? What keeps you from drawing near? When have you experienced someone drawing near to stand with you? How was that an expression of love?

Prayer

Merciful God, you know me so very well. You know the challenges that I face. You know those things within me that become detours and distractions from what you want for me. So, I place my life in your hands. Help me to answer your call to move toward those persons and places that need what you can do through me. Amen.

Wednesday, September 28

Scripture: Acts 20:32-35

Now I entrust you to God and the message of his grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all whom God has made holy. I haven't craved anyone's silver, gold, or clothing. You yourselves know that I have provided for my own needs and for those of my companions with my own hands. In everything I have shown you that, by working hard, we must help the weak. In this way we remember the Lord Jesus' words: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'

Observation

This is the final message that Paul gives to the Ephesians before traveling to Jerusalem. Once in Jerusalem, Paul would be arrested and ultimately sent to Rome remaining under arrest until his death. The Ephesians would never see Paul again.

Application

If this is Paul's summary statement of what he hoped the Ephesians saw in him, what might your summary statement be of what you hope others see in you? Who are the people in need where you live? How could you help meet a need today?

Prayer

Thank you, God, for giving me eyes that can see, hands that can serve, and a heart that can beat for the things that bring you joy. Let this be a day that I am focus beyond my needs to be the expression of your love to all whom I meet. Amen.

Thursday, September 29

Scripture: Isaiah 6:1-8

In the year of King Uzziah's death, I saw the Lord sitting on a high and exalted throne, the edges of his robe filling the temple. Winged creatures were stationed around him. Each had six wings: with two they veiled their faces, with two their feet, and with two they flew about. They shouted to each other, saying: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of heavenly forces! All the earth is filled with God's glory!" The doorframe shook at the sound of their shouting, and the house was filled with smoke. I said, "Mourn for me; I'm ruined! I'm a man with unclean lips, and I live among a people with unclean lips. Yet I've seen the king, the LORD of heavenly forces!" Then one of the winged creatures flew to me, holding a glowing coal that he had taken from the altar with tongs. He touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips. Your guilt has departed, and your sin is removed." Then I heard the Lord's voice saying, "Whom should I send, and who will go for us?" I said, "I'm here; send me."

Observation

This is the prophet Isaiah's call from God. Isaiah describes a very personal and spiritual experience of God's presence and call. Isaiah had a choice, and he chose to answer God's call. Isaiah would discover that God would also equip him for all that he would face. Isaiah did not just say yes to God, but Isaiah made himself available to God.

Application

The Lord asked, "Whom shall I send? And whom will go for us?" What would God have you do to become more "sendable" today? Remember, God equips whom God calls.

Prayer

God, what is mine to do? I have been blessed by knowing that you are with me and at work in my life. Help me to move forward, confident that as I do, you will equip me with what is needed to be your hands and feet in this world. Amen.

Friday, September 30

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

The prophet Amos delivers a stern warning straight from the heart of God. The people gave the appearance of being faithful to God, but their actions did not match their appearance. Amos makes very clear what God does and does not want.

Application

In a given week, what things vie for the top spot on your list of pressing priorities? What attitudes or habits would need to shift in your life in order for the goals of seeking justice and pursuing righteousness to top your priority list? How might making such shifts draw you closer to the heart of God?

Prayer

God, you know the challenges and the opportunities that I will face. So often, I am already in a place where what is needed by others could be found through me. Give me the wisdom to know what to do and the courage to do it. Help me to get off my donkey. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Saturday, October 1

Scripture: Matthew 25:31-46

"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.' "Then he will say to those on his left, '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. 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.' "Then they will reply, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and didn't do anything to help you?' Then he will answer, 'I assure you that when you haven't done it for one of the least of these, you haven't done it for me.' And they will go away into eternal punishment. But the righteous ones will go into eternal life."

Observation

After talking about the Temple's destruction and the end of the world (in sometimes puzzling terms), Jesus gave a word picture of the final judgment. His story about the judgment clearly conveyed his Kingdom's priorities. Kingdom people, he said, care for the hungry and thirsty, the poorly-clothed and strangers, the prisoners and the sick—the people whom Jesus called "the least of these brothers and sisters of mine."

Application

In Jesus' story, both those accepted and the ones who were turned away were surprised. They expected to meet Jesus in religious places, not in the streets among the needy and poor. But Jesus' story said we should notice all people in need of help and treat them as if it were Jesus himself in need. In what ways can you sense God reshaping your attitudes toward "the least of these" in your community and the wider world?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, show me the "least of these" in my wealthy neighbor who struggles emotionally or spiritually, my poor friend who suffers financially, my sick friend who needs your comfort while dying – and in myself, who needs more of you in my life. Amen.