

9.29.24

Households of Justice

Matthew 12.46-50

Douglas Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church

This past Friday we had a service here at BBC to give thanks for the life of longtime member Arthur Dickinson. One of things that was shared was an excerpt from a letter Arthur gave his daughter Andrea. He wrote, *“You have entered adulthood acknowledging the faults and errors in our society as you strive to overcome our social disparities and such dispiriting and egregious **injustices**. It is not possible to correct these problems in the short term, but you try to lessen these faults. **Injustices** will always be with us, but **their solutions lie in caring and understanding for those in need**. As Martin Luther King said: ‘You cannot drive out hatred with hatred, only love can do that.’ Love is that power.”*

Arthur was a quiet and reserved man who had a passionate concern for justice that came from his faith in Jesus and his understanding of the gospel. I was struck that in the providence of God we were having the service to celebrate his life the same weekend we were hearing from Matthew’s gospel that the church is to be household of justice. What do I mean by that? Matthew is convinced that you can know the will of God and do it. Right relationships, doing the will of God, and being obedient to the teachings of Jesus- are all understood as part of the work of justice. For Matthew, the church is a household of justice, that’s his central image.

We find it in **Matthew 12:46-50**,⁴⁶ While he was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and his brothers were standing outside, wanting to speak to him.⁴⁷ Someone told him, *“Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.”*⁴⁸ But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, *“Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?”*⁴⁹ And pointing to his disciples, he said, *“Here are my mother and my brothers!”*⁵⁰ For **whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.**

This passage *“is the theological heart of Matthew’s gospel. Households of faith cannot be based on race, blood, status, or wealth. The communities formed in allegiance to the power of Jesus are based exclusively on whether a person does the will of the One who sent Jesus. Jesus’ new family is not based on kinship or*

tradition but on being obedient to God, on a living a life that reflects the will of God.”¹

After doing Arthur’s service here at the church and the committal at the cemetery Jill and I drove up to Framingham late Friday afternoon because I’d been invited to be the preacher at the Massachusetts Baptist Multicultural Ministries conference on Friday evening. Present were people from Brazil, Haiti, Ghana, India, Burma, Nepal, Honduras, China, South Korea, Singapore, Bhutan, the Philippines, and other places. What an amazing reflection of Jesus’ family from around the world.

The person who read the scripture before I preached, read it in Burmese. As he read, I thought, how amazing God’s family is that here we are in Massachusetts, the state that Adoniram Judson left from just over 200 years ago in 1812 to bring the gospel to Burma, and one of his spiritual descendants is reading from the Book of Acts in Massachusetts. I began my sermon by telling the story of how my grandfather Victor Frank Scalise came to the United States by himself as a 16 year old from southern Italy. How he came through Ellis Island and made his way to North Adams, MA where the pastor of the First Baptist Church of North Adams, James Foster Wilcox, reached out to him, helped him learn English and in other practical ways and built a bridge of friendship that Jesus could walk across. Rev. Wilcox and my grandfather remained dear friends for the rest of their lives.

After I was done preaching, there was an opportunity for people to share a comment or an insight they gained or to ask a question. The first person who spoke was Rev: Bhim Gurung, Founder of The First Nepali Baptist Church, which meets in Malden, MA. He stood up and in a personal and moving way shared how grateful he was to hear me and meet me because my father had done for him what Rev. Wilcox did for my grandfather. He spoke with Jill and I at length at the end of the evening and again on Saturday morning. Then last night he sent me an email that said:

“Dear Dr. Douglas and family,

Love and greetings from the bottom of my heart.

It was by God's grace; I was able to meet you. I always longing for and seeking your family because of Dr. Victor, my spiritual father and mentor of my life. Because of him

¹ Keith Russell, In Search of the Church, p. 26.

today the First Nepali Baptist Church is standing here. I missed him a lot and we cannot forget his love and passion for Nepalese people like me.

When I heard your grandfather's travelled to the United States the same way your Dad accepted me that's why we are here today. I have so many heart touching stories about what your dad and mom have done for me. I can write a book. The long story is too short. I love you all as your parents had us. **Please accept me and my family as part of your family in Christ.**

I love to have you all to our church and I would like to come and share in your church if God willing after my mission trips to Nepal and India. Thank you, Brother and family. These are the pictures of our missionaries in India and Nepal. It is the hands and heart of your father Victor Scalise.

In His service

Rev: Bhim Gurung

Founder of The First Nepali Baptist Church, the Disciple of Victor Scalise."

I was so touched that we were experiencing exactly what Jesus was talking about in Matthew 12. ***Jesus' new family is not based on kinship or tradition but on being obedient to God, on a living a life that reflects the will of God.***

In contrast to Mark's emphasis on suffering, the stress in Matthew's gospel is on obedience. Households of faith are to obey the one who sent Jesus by engaging in right relationships with one another and with the world around them. Matthew is not suggesting salvation by doing good works, but that **salvation should produce good works**, establish right relationships and energize compassion and care, especially for those seen as the least in society.

Matthew is concerned with demonstrating that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law and the prophets and the Law, and the prophets talk about justice and care for the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the alien or stranger over and over. The primary task of the church as it emerges in Matthew's gospel is doing God's will and in particular doing justice for the poor. The Bible defines justice as a relational term that means treating others with dignity and fairness, and upholding God's standards of good and evil. The Bible's view of justice is based on the idea that all people are equal before God. Some aspects of justice in the Bible include:

- Loving your neighbor as you love yourself
- Living in right relationship with God, others, and creation
- Treating everyone with the same respect and standards, regardless of social standing.
- Changing social structures to prevent injustice

From a scriptural point of view, justice means loving our neighbor as we love ourselves and it's rooted in the character and nature of God. As God is just and loving, so we are called to do justice and live in love.

When we were in Norway earlier this month, we visited the Norwegian Museum of Cultural History in Oslo. There's a room with images carved into the ceiling and a sign with the title, "Thoughts in Time." This is what it said, *"How have our lines of thought changed throughout the centuries? What are we still carrying with us from the past? The ceiling above this introductory section of the exhibition depicts the seven virtues of faith, love, hope, justice, fortitude, prudence, and temperance. These symbolic images of the virtues reflect 17th-century religious and moral thought and the values people were ideally expected to live up to. Today the virtues **may seem like unfamiliar relics from a distant past.** Is it possible that they still express general human values that are recognizable across the centuries?"*

I was so struck by this description I took a photo of it. If the **"virtues of faith, love, hope, justice, fortitude, prudence, and temperance," are "unfamiliar relics from a distant past,"** we're in big trouble. They're all incredibly needed and beneficial both to individuals and to nations. Would any of us want to live in a society without faith, hope, love, justice and the rest?

Psalm 33:4 says, **"God loves righteousness and justice."** When the prophet Micah was summing up the Lord's requirements of people, Micah said (6:8 ESV), *"and what does the Lord require of you **but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?**"*

Earlier in the service Pastor Joe read Matthew 25:31-40 which is part of the Judgment of the Nations. This is found only in Matthew. The importance of doing justice and caring for and responding to the needs of the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick, or those in prison is so important to Jesus that Matthew repeats it four times in this

passage (in Matthew 25:31-46) in the call and response between the Lord and the righteous and the unrighteous. In his vision of the Last Judgment, Jesus is restating the ancient truth in Isaiah 58. **Our relationship with others reveals our relationship with God.** Jesus spoke these words to his disciples on the Mount of Olives looking down at Jerusalem. Soon he'd die the shameful death of a common criminal on a cross. Yet he can say, *"When the Son of Man comes in his glory all the nations will be gathered before him"* in a similar manner to the judgment scene portrayed in **Ezekiel 34:17** which says, *"As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord God: I shall judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and goats."*

In Matthew, Jesus often makes strong distinctions between people. He said some build their lives on rock, others on sand; some are wheat, and some are weeds; some walk the narrow way that leads to life, others the broad way that leads to destruction. Jesus will separate people one from another. The judgment Jesus makes has nothing to do with nationality, skin color, language, wealth, poverty, or education. Jesus will judge us in accordance with doing justice and our unconscious, uncalculating service and kindness to others in need. Because these small acts of service are the natural result of a living faith, often they're not even remembered. In Matthew 25, the righteous don't have any recollection of seeing Jesus and serving him. They were doing what they felt was just and right to help someone in need. Yet the Bible teaches us that small acts of kindness done to the overlooked and often ignored members of God's family are done to Christ himself.

Jesus tells us there will be surprises on the Day of Judgment. The just or righteous are surprised, *"Lord when was it that we saw you?"* Their acts of justice and kindness had not been done to gain human or divine approval. They simply reflect the truth Jesus states in **Matthew 12:35**, *"The good person brings good things out of a good treasure, and the evil person brings evil things out of an evil treasure."* The deeds Jesus commends in Matthew 25 are simple things which anyone can do – provide a meal or a drink, welcome a stranger, visit the sick or the prisoner. These acts don't really require any specialized skill or training so much as they require a heart filled with love and a willing spirit.

In Jesus' parable the folks who Jesus calls unrighteous, thought they were righteous, and they're shocked and surprised that they're not going to an eternal reward. They want to know from Jesus, *"When did we see you"* and not respond. When Jesus tells them they're upset. Their line of thinking is, *"Jesus, if I had known it was you, I would have helped you out."* The implication is, *"If we had known it was you, Jesus, I would have treated that person differently."* Their failure was doing everything for their own calculated benefit. Doing justice, Christian service, mission engagement, and giving are not to be calculated either in amount, *"Let's see what I can afford to give after I've done everything I want for myself."* Nor is it calculated for effect, *"I know I will get lots of praise and attention."* Acts of justice and service that win the approval of God are done out of unmeasured love.

I read about a pastor whose church always has folks inside it because of its programs for the homeless, for those seeking to overcome addiction to alcohol or drugs, a food and clothing pantry, and a literacy ministry. Some of the church members were getting upset because of the appearance of some of the folks who were being served and the constant use of the facility. One man asked the pastor, *"What are you trying to do bringing all these people in here?"* *"Save people from hell,"* the pastor replied. *"Oh, I see. You're trying to save these people from hell,"* the man said. The pastor replied, *"Not them, us!"*

In Matthew 23:23 Jesus says, *"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected **the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith.** It is these you ought to have practiced **without neglecting the others.**"*

Matthew's picture of the church has high expectations for its members, and so do we – to practice justice, mercy, and faith. We had our latest new member information session this past Wednesday night and we talk about striving to keep growing spiritually into the fullness of Christ, participating in worship, engaging in spiritual disciplines, using our gifts in service, supporting the church financially, and being in a small group for support and accountability.

Matthew 25 states that from the perspective of the Judge of the Universe, **it's not just what we do but what we don't do that can get us into trouble.**

Jesus, Matthew, Paul and James, all tell us, that faith without works is dead, it's useless, it's mere self-deception. The same apostle Paul who wrote in **Ephesians 2:8** that *"we are saved by grace and not by works so no one may boast"* also wrote in **2 Corinthians 5:10**, ***"For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil."*** Some people seem to think grace and judgment are incompatible, that love and accountability aren't connected and that verbal claims to faith and how we live our life don't matter. They are and they do. If we've been touched by grace, our love for Jesus will be revealed in our treatment of others especially the poor, the neglected, the downtrodden, the homeless, the refugee, the person who may appear to be totally different and "other" than ourselves. As we seek to be faithful in our time, may we strive to do everything in our power to make our church a household of justice.

Blessing: Jeremiah 9:24, but let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the Lord.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. What do you think of when you hear the word justice?
2. How would you define justice?
3. Read some or all the following passages from the Bible that speak about justice, (Deuteronomy 32:4, Psalms 9:7, 10:17-18, 33:4-5, 106:3, Isaiah 1:17, 9:7, 30:18, 61:8, Jeremiah 9:24, Ezekiel 34:16, Micah 6:8, Amos 5:24), what do we learn about justice in these verses?
4. Why is justice important in relationships, in a community, in a nation?
5. Read these passages aloud as a group, Matthew 12:15-21, 23:23-24. What do they tell us about Matthew's understanding of justice?
6. Matthew is convinced that you can know the will of God and do it (see Matthew 7:21-23, 12:46-50). Why is the doing of God's will and not just saying we believe so important to Matthew?