



St. Paul Lutheran Church

“Your Refuge from the Storm”

LifeGroup Study

June 23, 2024

Zechariah 7:8-10; Matthew 25:31-46

Community

THEME FOR TODAY

There are certain things that matter to God and God’s family.

WHAT DO WE WANT OUR SMALL GROUP TO KNOW?

We want to know what matters to God so that we can live these values in our life. And what are those values, according to Jesus? Here are just three of them: the value of selfless living; the value of the least of these; and the value of discipleship in daily life.

WHAT DO WE WANT OUR SMALL GROUP TO DO?

Selfless living, the least of these and discipleship in daily life. These are the values of the family of faith. These are the values of the Kingdom. These are the things that matter to God and should matter to us. We want to live into these values.

INTRODUCTION

Every family has values that matter. Sometimes these values are verbalized, but more often they are simply lived out, unquestioned. Here are a few of mine:

- Education. In my family, good grades always got you a trip to Baskin-Robbins.
- Family. Missing family dinner was not an option. Every major holiday was spent with extended family.
- Marriage. While I knew that I was important to my parents, I also knew that their marriage was the most important thing in the world to them. There was no playing mom off dad in our house!

ICEBREAKER

Can you articulate the values in your family while you were growing up? Were they passed from one generation to another?

PRAY TOGETHER

Father God, come and shape our lives by your Kingdom’s values. Help us to swim against the current into a new reality of selfless living. Teach us how to value the “least of these,” and identify with the needs of the meek and the weak. Lead us into deeper discipleship where faith is lived in every moment of every day. We want to invest and engage in everything that matters to you. Amen.

Content

(Read Matthew 25:31-46). This is the final parable in the Gospel of Matthew concerning the Kingdom of God. In many ways it summarizes the core themes that Jesus emphasizes throughout his teaching ministry. Robert Farrar Capon (*Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus*)

suggests five unique characteristics of God’s saving action in the Kingdom. The Kingdom is catholic, not parochial; mysterious, not recognizable; actual, not merely virtual or on the way; met with hostility as well as welcome; and calls for a response of faith rather than one of works.

The parable of the great judgment brings each of these themes full circle in a variety of ways. The catholicity of the Kingdom is seen when all nations are gathered and held accountable. The mystery of the Kingdom is revealed at the great judgment. Jesus returns in glory and all things are out in the open.

The actuality of the Kingdom is seen through accountability. The parable assumes that, all along, all nations are expected to be actively living into the Kingdom.

The hostility and welcome is illustrated by the divergent response of the sheep and the goats in daily life. The response of faith, as opposed to works, is inherent in the sheep, who have no idea that they are doing anything of “Kingdom value.” The implication is that they are simply doing what their hearts lead them to do, not because they have to, but because they choose to.

DISCUSSION

Name a place where you see the catholicity, or universality, of the Kingdom of God. In what way is the Kingdom “mysterious” to you? What does it mean that all nations will be active in living into the Kingdom? Where have you seen hostility in regard to the Kingdom? How about welcome? Why is faith the first response?

Many commentators overlay this parable with the idea that the sheep are believers and the goats are non-believers. However, it’s not necessarily the parable itself that gives us that perspective, especially if by “believers” we mean those who have “right doctrine,” or those who have “put their faith in the cross of Christ.” Remember that those who first heard this parable had not yet seen Jesus crucified!

Instead, let’s go back to *the* good news that Jesus proclaimed: “Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand.” Throughout his ministry, Jesus describes the core values of Kingdom living through parables and the Sermon on the Mount. Those who believe the good news are those who take Jesus at his word: this Kingdom *is* at hand, and all are invited to live into this new reality in which love, forgiveness, justice, mercy, service, trust and kindness are core values.

From this perspective the parable begins to make sense. The sheep apparently believe the good news and live into it. The goats do not. This is not a matter of works/righteousness; it’s a matter of one’s actions revealing one’s faith.

DISCUSSION

What core values are present in your faith community, and how are they expressed? Why do you think the word “repent” comes before the statement that the kingdom is at hand? Why is repentance important, or necessary?

The family of faith also has core values. Though we often argue about them within the family, Jesus is relatively clear about them in our text today. Perhaps he was clear about them throughout his ministry. The parable of the great judgment holds up several:

- Selfless living. Life in the Kingdom is a matter of giving one's self away in service to others.
- Priority of the "least of these." Jesus puts a priority on those who are weak, lost, disenfranchised, oppressed, and discarded. These are the very people with whom he identifies and in whom he dwells.
- Discipleship in daily life. Faith isn't what we do on Sunday morning; it's how we live every moment of every day.

DISCUSSION

What does selfless living look like to you? Where have you seen it? Where do we encounter the "least of these" in our context, and who are they? How do you live out discipleship every day?

GOING DEEPER: ZECHARIAH 7:8-10

Zechariah speaks primarily words of encouragement to the Jews who have returned to Judah under the leadership of the governor Zerubbabel and the high priest Joshua to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. Zechariah is aware, however, that not all who returned are fully sincere in their devotion to God. It is to these people that Zechariah addresses these verses, calling people to repentance and a whole-hearted devotion to God. Zechariah advocates:

- Honesty in the courts, rendering justice, not self-interest.
- Kindness and mercy expressed toward one another.
- Justice and compassion toward those who are oppressed, weak and powerless, particularly widows, orphans, aliens and the poor.
- A heart inclined toward good, rather than one filled with evil toward others.

These words are still relevant today, confronting and challenging the systems in our culture that oppress and deny a voice to the voiceless in the world. What would God say today to a church that is obsessed with issues of human sexuality?

DISCUSSION

How are these words from Zechariah similar to the words of Jesus in Matthew? Why do widows, orphans, aliens and the poor get special attention in the scriptures? Once again, repentance is a key element in this text. What do we need to repent today?

Application

How would your life be different if you lived these values? How would our small group experience be different if we lived these values? How would your decisions, the investment of your time, the investment of your gifts and resources, be different? How would your prayers change? How might your voting patterns change? What would you teach your children and grandchildren, and the children in your midst, not just with your words but with your

lives? How might your view of the world around you change, both the places you know and the places you've always feared to venture? Based on your honest answers, how might you need to repent in order to more fully live into the Kingdom of God?

PRAY TOGETHER

(As a group, take this time to repent and ask God for direction and forgiveness, then pray out loud together.)

ALL: God, we repent and confess that sin has us in its grip and we cannot escape. We "look out for number one" at all costs, and want to accumulate more and more. We want to be rich, famous, powerful, and beautiful. We often treat our faith as fulfilling our religious duty. Forgive us, and set us free to live into your new Kingdom reality.

LEADER: The King of this new Kingdom is the One who washed feet and sought to serve others. This King died on a cross for you and me. This King calls us to change our way of thinking and our way of living. This King dwells with the weak, lost, poor, disenfranchised, oppressed and discarded. This King calls us to feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, give a drink to the thirsty and visit the prisoner.

ALL: Jesus, you are our King! Amen!

How would our church be a different place if we lived these values? What would our mission and ministry look like if we committed together to live these family values?

If this is what matters in the family of God, how might "being the church together" look different? How would our worship look? Our education? Our volunteer opportunities? The investment of our offerings? How might our preaching and teaching be different? In light of the Kingdom of God, what should we do with our facilities? How do we want to be known in the community around us?

SENDING

ADDITIONAL CONVERSATION AND REFLECTION

Being Found at Work

Matthew 24:46

Matthew 24-25 is not exactly warm and fuzzy! It deals with the end, and God's judgment. Christians debate the meaning of these chapters, but one thing is perfectly clear: Jesus expects to find us busy at his Kingdom work when he returns. Each of us is, from Jesus' perspective, on assignment for God in daily life, investing all that God has entrusted to us for the sake of God's agenda of love, mercy, justice and reconciliation. This does not mean that Jesus expects us to quit our jobs and do something else. Instead Jesus expects us to be ambassadors of his love no matter what we're doing. Every task in life is holy when we bring Christ into it in our words, our heart and our actions.

Matthew 25:31-46 NLT “But when the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit upon his glorious throne. (32) All the nations will be gathered in his presence, and he will separate the people as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. (33) He will place the sheep at his right hand and the goats at his left. (34) “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world. (35) For I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home. (36) I was naked, and you gave me clothing. I was sick, and you cared for me. I was in prison, and you visited me.’ (37) “Then these righteous ones will reply, ‘Lord, when did we ever see you hungry and feed you? Or thirsty and give you something to drink? (38) Or a stranger and show you hospitality? Or naked and give you clothing? (39) When did we ever see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ (40) “And the King will say, ‘I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!’ (41) “Then the King will turn to those on the left and say, ‘Away with you, you cursed ones, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his demons. (42) For I was hungry, and you didn’t feed me. I was thirsty, and you didn’t give me a drink. (43) I was a stranger, and you didn’t invite me into your home. I was naked, and you didn’t give me clothing. I was sick and in prison, and you didn’t visit me.’ (44) “Then they will reply, ‘Lord, when did we ever see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and not help you?’ (45) “And he will answer, ‘I tell you the truth, when you refused to help the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were refusing to help me.’ (46) “And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous will go into eternal life.”