

Squamish United Church

November 18, 2018

Rev. Karen Millard

Stewardship Sunday

(only part of this sermon was preached I will connect again next Sunday)

Based on Matthew 25:31-46

Following the Spirit

When we began our series on stewardship the Spirit led us into the parable of the Good Samaritan, we used the image of our cup overflowing as gratitude pours out of our lives God's love abounds through us and the love of God expands spreading out from this place, into our lives, into the lives of others and refreshes and nourishes our world. Living in a constant posture of abundance can be challenging but it is the only way we can live if we long for our gratitude to overflow in love. Overflowing with loving gratitude, living in a posture of abundance is my deepest prayer for us.

After this reminder to give thanks in our second stewardship we were reminded that our overflowing love and faith calls out a spirit of compassion and sharing. Giving not out of obligation but out of gratitude for what has been given us by our creator. We remembered that we are God's hands and feet in the world. The children took that symbol out into the streets on November 10th as they celebrated St. Martin's day. They made their paper lanterns and took those simple gifts and journeyed out into the dark taking light into the world. What a beautiful expression.

Today, the Spirit is drawing us into an even more challenging story. A story about the consequences of not expressing love. There is nothing soft about the parable of the sheep and goats. It's piercing. It's Jesus leaning close to us and staring into the whites of our eyes, with a look that runs all the way through to the soles of our feet: "Whatever you did for the least of these members of my family (the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the unclothed, the ill, and the imprisoned) you did to me."

Sit with that for a moment.

If we have come to church for all our lives those words are likely so familiar we didn't even hear them. Listen this time.

"Whatever you did for the least of these members of my family (the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the unclothed, the ill, and the imprisoned) you did to me."

The first thing I hear today is the voice of my Ami as we are coming home from school the other day. "Nanay, why do some people not have a home, and have to ask people for money?" I'm sure I danced around the answer with something like, "Some people have had hard times in their lives and so they have lost their jobs and cannot afford a home." How does that happen? "It is different for everyone, maybe they had an accident, or maybe they are sick and they have not been able to get the assistance they need." "Why don't you give people money Nanay?" "Oh sometimes I do, but I have a certain amount I have to give." "When did you last give someone some money when they needed it Nanay?" Fortunately I was able to answer well... just the other

day. But God, I mean Ami didn't let me off the hook too quick. "You should always help people Nanay." "Yes, Ami we always should, you are right... the conversation continued.

The children in our children's church many of them are hearing these stories and understanding them for the first time. Their faith is getting rooted and God is calling us through them to remember. I'm sure Ami's questions came out of hearing the story of the good Samaritan, following by St. Martin accompanied with conversations about community Christmas care enhanced by seeing some homeless people right here on our streets.

"Whatever you did for the least of these members of my family (the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the unclothed, the ill, and the imprisoned) you did to me."

I really don't know whether Jesus would consider me a sheep or a goat. To be honest, most days, I cover the range between the two. In fact, I can go from sheep to goat within the hour.

So can entire nations. In fact, from the very beginning, Matthew's Jesus is talking about how "all the nations" will be gathered before him and then he will separate them into sheep and goats. We don't know if when he says "all the nations," he's talking about the Jewish people, Christians and Pagans, but there is a sense of collective judgment based on collective sin and systemic wrong.

Think about the marginalized groups Jesus lists: hungry, thirsty, outcast, ill, unclothed and imprisoned. 2000 years later, these groups are still in need.

We're born into a goat kind of world. And to be honest my perception is recently we are only getting 'goatier.'

So where's the good news? The good news is that we are also born into a sheep kind of world. The kind of world where everyday people like you and I, and committed communities, and agencies like Sea to Sky Community Services are making a difference.

A world where collectively, we can be the church, the sheep who follow the shepherd, the sheep that have an intimate relationship with Jesus that he knows by name.

The other piece of good news is we have the power to choose who we want to be.

Culturally, Matthew's gospel isn't saying anything new. In the ancient Near East, there were stories already circulating about how there would be a final judgment based on acts of mercy. The book of Matthew raises the bar, though. It's explicit.

Matthew's Jesus calls us to radical discipleship. A love that goes above and beyond. The least is indisputable: hungry, thirsty, stranger, unclothed, ill, imprisoned. Think about how serious Jesus was for a moment. Caring for the sick in biblical times would put you at risk of infection far more than it does today. They had fears of disease being passed just seeing a person. They didn't have the sanitation or tools we do today. Even sin was thought to be transmitted by keeping company with the wrong people. Discipleship is risky business. It's never been easy to be a sheep who strives to follow a shepherd like Jesus. It's demanding. Yet that's our Christian call. It is the missional call of our church to care for the least as though Jesus' life hangs in the balance - because it does.

Week in and week out Squamish United and St. John's try our best to follow Jesus. When we care for the community of Squamish in a variety of ways, I believe we respond to our Shepherd's loving call. When we get our behind community Christmas care, we gather at the feet of his great love. When we collect socks and put together toiletry bags together for helping hands and first United, he leads us to abundant fields where we ourselves are fed. When we share in a turkey fundraising lunch for folks on the downtown Eastside we feed Jesus who feeds our souls. "A gift opens the way and ushers the giver into the presence of the great," says Proverbs 18:16. That Proverb is so true, isn't it? Through our giving and generosity, God tends us. Squamish United took a big risk building this place, it took a lot of courageous generosity and for some it feels like the abundance we had has slipped away but if you spend many days in this place you will see its impact and the gifts we are offering. The people we encounter every day that we never would have met, the support we are able to give because suddenly people feel safe to walk in our doors. The conversations I am able to have with people that honestly said to me things like "I don't know what to do with you because you are a pastor" Those people now come talk to me on a weekly basis, some of us have even become friends. Folks this is kingdom stuff. It is breaking down barriers and walls that the rest of the world seems to be attempting to fortify. When I stop focussing on the anxiety of the money and I look around I am filled with gratitude, my cup overflows. Between you and me... I had a really hard week. Hard enough that one morning I texted a trusted group of colleagues and they began to offer prayers and they encouraged me to stop and breathe. I had a meeting in ten minutes and so I couldn't just drop everything and collapse the way I honestly wanted to. And so showered in text message prayers I walked into this space and I stood here, and I breathed deeply and the spirit showered me with reminders of grace and love and opportunity and I realized once again I/we are truly blessed...

I believe the Spirit of Jesus draws us into our sacred stories, the stories that both inspire and challenge us. I believe Jesus is drawing us into this story today. I believe that the Spirit of Jesus has held our hand through this story and is now leading us by the hand out through the pages of the story into chapters of our lives.

Imagine. Imagine Jesus leading you, personally. Imagine him taking you out of this church and back onto the street...the nameless street between Jerusalem and Jericho were we find a man beaten on the side of the road, that could be the street in front of your home or the street of your workplace or neighbourhood, it could be in this building, or the street that runs through the heart of your relationships. There is someone on a road somewhere in your life waiting for your thanksgiving, your gratitude to overflow in love. Imagine who that might be.

Who is that someone that Jesus is drawing your heart to? Who is hungry in the streets of your life – not just hungry for food but hungry for love? Who is naked – not only lacking clothes but deeply vulnerable? Who is the stranger, the outcast? Who is lonely? Who doesn't fit in? Who is sick – sick in their body, their mind, their spirit? Who is in prison – a literal prison, or a prison of thought, or shame or grief? Who is your shepherd leading you to?

Right now, in this moment when Jesus is calling you to draw nearer, you have the power to choose who you want to be. We, as congregations, have the power to choose who we are going to be. To choose how we are going to participate in the kingdom come.

... (pause)

There are many understandings of the kingdom in the scripture. There is a sense of it being future oriented and something we aspire toward, either when our worldly life ends or when Jesus is said to return and restore the order of the world. There is also the sense of the kingdom coming now, being created now, something we can experience today.

I don't think Jesus is any more interested in separating sheep and goats than I am in separating my laundry. What he's really interested in is motivating us as the sheep to contribute to the building of a kingdom of love, generosity, compassion, shalom. The kingdom that the church prays for "thy kingdom come!" and that we were made for.

The good news today is that Jesus leads us by the hand and heart individually and collectively to experience him in the least and lost. When we are there on the road, when the least are in front of us, we have a choice.

We can choose who we want to be. We can choose to hear Jesus' voice calling out of the scripture, out of the message, out of the worship, into our lives. We can hear us being called loved and beloved so that we too can love with an abundant love and gratitude this day.