

Introduction

Today is a special day, in that we get to celebrate both of our sacraments: baptism and communion. Both are visible signs of God's invisible grace, the grace that alone can save us. In Ephesians 2:8-10, Paul famously writes this: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life."

We do not earn the right to be adopted into God's family, and yet God adopts us. That is shown through baptism. We do not earn the right to be invited to the Lord's table to celebrate the Lord's supper, and yet God invites us. That is shown through communion. We are what we are - saved, loved, forgiven, because of God's grace and not by our works. Amen and amen. Hallelujah.

We all need to be reminded of this truth. Grace, grace, grace. Grace upon grace, as John 1 says. Saved by grace through faith and not the result of works. Works do not save us, but I'm here to tell you that works are still crucial. James 2:17 says, "Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." Think of it like a tree. A tree is not saved by its fruit, it is nourished by water, soil, and light. But is a fruit tree healthy if it does not produce fruit? Jesus tells us that the tree is judged by its fruit. We are saved by grace through faith, but is our faith healthy if we are not producing the good works that

Jesus has called us to? Today's passage is both challenging and hopeful as it calls us to bear fruit.

Passage

In this passage, Jesus is telling us what it will be like when he returns. He's been telling his disciples that he must die, that he will be raised again, that he will ascend to the Father, and that he'll one day come back. When he does come back, he'll be seated on the throne and all the nations, everyone, will be gathered before him. And Jesus says that he will divide everyone into two groups. There are two kinds of people, Jesus tells us. Those who care for and serve Jesus, and those who don't. Those who do are saved and those who don't are kicked out of the Kingdom. But both sides are a little confused. To the first group, Jesus says, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

The other group was equally confused when Jesus said that they didn't care for or serve him. Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'

On the surface, it looks like we are saved by works in this passage, right? Without taking away the importance of good works, this passage actually shows us that it is still by grace. First, the righteous group is first characterized not by their righteousness but by their blessedness. "Come, *you that are blessed by my father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.*" Blessed by God. We don't earn that, God grants it. Inherit. We don't earn an inheritance, God grants it. It is up to God's grace, not our works.

Here's how I boil this passage down. In this parable, the saved are not saved by their works. But, the works define the saved. God saves us *from* sin and death, AND God saves us *for* good works.

We can take this grace over works thing way too far, to the point where works are no longer important. Works are still crucial to our faith. Even that famous passage in Ephesians says that we were created in Christ Jesus for good works!

Y'all

And according to this passage, good works are those that serve and care for Jesus. But what does serving or caring for Jesus look like? Serving and caring for the least of these. It means feeding the hungry. Giving drink to the thirsty. Welcoming the stranger. Clothing the naked. Caring for the sick. Visiting the prisoner.

This passage has some important takeaways for us. I want to focus on two.

First, every single “you” in the passage is plural. Every time Jesus says “I was hungry and *you* gave me food, I was thirsty and *you* gave me something to drink...” the you is plural. This good works thing, this serving the least of these things, it’s a team effort. Now, in English, we don’t have a proper way to express you plural the way Greek does. We have unofficial ways. You all. You guys. Yous guys. Or my favorite, and in my opinion, the most efficient and effective: y’all. Or the emphatic, all y’all. My mom grew up in Mississippi, or more properly, Mississippi. So, while my mom has lost her accent after years of living in Southern California, she still uses y’all. In fact, when she’s angry the accent comes out. I have fond memories of making too much noise from the backseat of my mom’s car as my brother, sister and I were packed together back there, and my mom would turn around and - instead of be quiet or shut up - she’d say, “Y’all hush!” So I grew up with this word. When I was taking Greek and Hebrew in seminary, we would translate you plural as y’all sometimes to get the point across. I’ll show you what I mean.

‘Come, all y’all that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for y’all from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and y’all gave me food, I was thirsty and y’all gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and y’all welcomed me, I was naked and y’all gave me clothing, I was sick and y’all took care of me, I was in prison and y’all visited me.’

I know it’s silly, but that tells us something different. Caring for the hungry, thirsty, sick, etc. is a team effort. It’s an all y’all thing. Our faith has to be equal parts God and *me* and God and *we*. Our faith is a communal one. In fact, that’s why we do baptism and communion the way we do. Baptism in our tradition cannot be done outside of the church community. It takes all of us to raise a child in Christ. Communion, with some special circumstances like those who physically cannot come to church, is done in community. In communion we commune with God and with one another as we all together receive the generous and bountiful grace that God offers us. Our faith, our discipleship, our relationship with Jesus, has to have a communal aspect. You as an individual are called to serve and care for Jesus. You as a group of Christians are called to serve and care for Jesus. Or, as my mom would say, all y’all are called to serve and care for Jesus.

WE

That’s the first point. This Matthew 25 faith is a team effort. The second point is more of a bombshell. We have to serve and care for the poor. The hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the

sick, the prisoner. We have to serve and care for the poor. If we do not serve and care for the poor, we do not serve and care for Jesus. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus' first words to the public are the words of Isaiah 61 we heard earlier. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." The phrase Good news and the Gospel are synonymous, as Gospel literally means good news. In other words, Jesus came to bring the Gospel to the poor.

We are not living out the Gospel if we are not serving and caring for the poor. Or, put another way by author Richard Rohr, "If our gospel is not 'good news to the poor,' it is not the gospel of Jesus Christ."

Finally, I think we need to combine these two points. When we think of our faith as God and we, the "we" needs to include the least of these. The least of these, the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the prisoner are not just people "out there" for us to serve, they should be welcomed and loved here. We need them to be a part of our "we" in our God and we relationship.

Conclusion

I do not tell you this to save you. Remember, our good works do not save us. But good works, serving and caring for the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the prisoner is

the result of true faith. And if we take Matthew 25 seriously, which I implore you to do, we must all ask ourselves: what is the state of my faith? It is never too late to serve, and there is no act of service that is too small. Start with your own family, your own church, your coworkers. Serve others until it becomes part of who you are.

Service is our Lenten Spiritual Discipline today. Throughout Lent we have been exploring different spiritual disciplines to grow in our faith and to better listen to Jesus. I invite you to get comfortable in your seat, take some deep breaths, close your eyes if it helps you focus, and consider the spiritual discipline of service.

Definition: Service means to reflect the helping, caring, and sharing love of God in the world.

Practicing Service includes:

- Walking the talk; being what you profess
- Doing service projects: Habitat for Humanity, mission trips, volunteerism, foster care, prison ministry, etc.
- Mentoring, gifts of mercy, and helping
- Using your influence to better the lives of others
- Using your gifts to be a partner in God's Kingdom

Reflection Questions:

- What is it like to be loved by someone as he or she loves him- or herself?
- Do you like to be served or to serve? How does this affect the way you live?
- When do you live out of an entitlement mentality rather than love of neighbor?