

25 + 28 + 22 = ☺

Rev. Bill Rindy

Bishop, EaND Synod, ELCA

Matthew 25:34-40

The Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew, the 25th chapter:

³⁴'Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ³⁵'For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; ³⁶naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.'

³⁷'Then the righteous will answer Him, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You something to drink? ³⁸'And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? ³⁹'When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' ⁴⁰'The King will answer and say to them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.' (Matthew 25: 34-40, NASV)

The Gospel of our Lord

This weekend, the congregations of our synod are gathering in Fargo for our annual assembly. As we and they gather, we do so around the theme, **God's Work. Our Hands: Meeting the Needs of a Hungry World.** This theme was adopted by our synod at last year's assembly. Much of what they will be doing revolves around our care for the hungry.

The Bible is a *big* book. The Word of God comes to us through these Holy Scriptures. It comes bringing laws which accuse, restrict, guide, and shape us. The law even sentences us to death. These same Scriptures also reveal the Living Word to us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the Christ, who alone can raise us up to new life, where as it says in the Small Catechism, (and Romans 6) to serve him in righteousness and blessedness all of our days.

Living in North Dakota, we know about ditches. Ditches are actually good things. They help to move water. They help to point out the road. But when you are driving down the road, they are good to avoid. In times like we've been experiencing, ditches can even be fatal.

It's good to avoid the ditches.

In living out the Christian faith, there can be theological ditches as well. As good Lutherans, we know that we are not saved *by* good works. We are saved by grace, through faith, just as it says in Ephesians 2:8-9

⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; ⁹not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. (NASB)

But if we stop there at the end of verse 9, we can end up in a ditch. Not wanting to look like we are placing our trust on good works, at times we've avoided doing them altogether. After all, we wouldn't want people to think that we're working our way to heaven. We're Lutheran! We know about grace!

If we read on to verse 10, we find out WHY we have been saved; our purpose in life: *¹⁰For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.*

While we are not saved *by* good works, we are saved *for* a life of God-given good works. As people who are so blessed, we are able to respond: we are response-able. As we live out this God-given life of good works, we are bearing good fruit, just as we were created to do. In so doing, we please God and put a smile on God's face.

So while we are saved *FOR* good works, we are not saved *BY* them.

This is one ditch to avoid. Putting our trust in our own good works, thinking that God will somehow let us into heaven because we've been good, is in reality, putting our trust in something *other* than the saving work of Jesus Christ. Showing up in front of a Holy God with your own righteousness is a foolish thing to do. To be clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ through faith in Christ alone is not only the safest, but also the only blessed way in which to stand before God.

From time to time, the church has fought over the roles or importance of grace and faith vs. good works. The epistle of James reflects this well. Some people argue that we need to be a Matthew 28 church, a great commission church. This is true. Jesus' commission couldn't be clearer:

18 And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. 19 "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Matthew 28:18-20 (NASB)

As Lutheran Christians, we are to be in the disciple making business: Going, Making, Baptizing, and Teaching. This is most certainly true.

Yet we are not only people of the Great Commission, we are people of the Great Commandment:

36 "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" 37 Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' 40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." Matthew 22:36-40 (New International Version, ©2011)

Our texts for today and the Great Commandment show that love is quite important to God as well: loving God intensely with all we are is important.

We need to be a Matthew 22 church.

Yet how does one love God? Scripture gives us hints at how we do that. One of the most clear comes from 1st John. While this whole letter compels us to love, these verses sum it up well:

19 We love because he first loved us. 20 Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. 21 And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister. 1 John 4:19-20 (NIV)

We know what love looks like because of Jesus' modeling it for us: laying down one's life for one's friends... not only for Jesus friends, but for his

enemies, those who killed him, and for the whole God-so-loved world. This is love in action, not in just words.

This brings us full circle to today's text. In caring for the least of these, we care for Jesus. In welcoming the stranger, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick & imprisoned, and giving drink to the thirsty, we are loving our neighbor. We are loving Jesus in his many and varied, distressing disguises. We are loving God.

We need to be a Matthew 25 church.

So today, let us not allow the ditches to grab us, but rather let the ditches keep us on the road of being saved by grace through faith, while at the same time doing the works of love God laid out for us as response-able, well-loved children of God.

May our lives reflect God's love in such ways that others will see our good works and give glory to our Father in heaven. May we feed the hungry in such ways that people might see how we love, fulfilling the law of Christ.

³⁴'Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ³⁵'For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; ³⁶naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.'

³⁷'Then the righteous will answer Him, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You something to drink? ³⁸'And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? ³⁹'When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' ⁴⁰'The King will answer and say to them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.' (Matthew 25: 34-40, NASV)

Amen.