**SCRIPTURE READING**

***MATTHEW 25: 31 - 46***

**GOSPEL LESSON**

***MATTHEW 25: 31 – 46***

***(New Revised Standard Version)***

31 “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. 32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, 33 and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. 34 Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 35 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, 36 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.’ 37 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? 38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ 40 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.’ 41 Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; 42 for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ 44 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?’ 45 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.’ 46And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

First Congregational Church of Randolph September 26, 2021

***LEAST OF THESE***

It’s a great story.

And a good question:

A few weeks ago the Rev. Marilyn Kendrix offered us the Word of God as our guest preacher.

After worship we gathered for a conversation here in the sanctuary and online.

During that conversation she offered a story. That story has many different forms and I want to share the one that I know:

It’s a great story.

And a good question:

Once upon a time, there was a village that sat just beyond a bend in a great river.

One day, the villagers noted a few people floating past them on that river.

Some were dead and some were ill and injured.

The villagers quickly jumped into action.

They honored with ceremonies then buried the dead.

They tended the illnesses and wounds and restored the living to health.

A few days later, more people came floating down the river. Then more people. Then more… and more… and more. And every time, the villagers responded in the same way. They pulled the people out of the river.

They honored with ceremonies then buried the dead.

They tended the illnesses and wounds and restored the living to health.

They organized. They divided up labor. They sought donations. They built facilities. They began to set up a rapid response system.

However, the work of tending to the people floating around the bend in the river was never-ending.

One day, a young woman came to the village. She asked what was happening.

The villagers explained about the people in the river and all the work they were doing in response. They told her that they could sure use her help.

She readily agreed and began walking away.

The leaders stopped and said, “We thought, you wanted to help! You’re leaving! Where are you going?”

She replied, “I do want to help. I’m going up river to find out why the people are ending up in the water.”

Who was more right, more righteous, the woman or the villagers?

Walter Brueggemann is a much loved teacher of ministry and professor of scripture.

* He wrote: “*The task of … ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.”*
* He also wrote: *“The … tasks of the church are to tell the truth in a society that lives in illusion, grieve in a society that practices denial, and express hope in a society that lives in despair.”*

<https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/94307-the-prophetic-imagination>

Which of his statements is more right or more righteous?

Who would he have said was more right or more righteous; the woman or the villagers?

Jesus in the Gospel today

This well known passage is part of a larger storyline:

According to scripture scholars:

“Arguably, this discourse begins in chapter 23 with Jesus' reprimand of the scribes, Pharisees and hypocrites;

it continues on into chapter 24 with descriptions of the fall of Jerusalem and the coming of the Son of Man at the end of the ages,

and concludes with Jesus' telling parables in response to the question: “

[Matthew 24:45*“Who then is the faithful and wise servant…?]*

<https://www.homileticsonline.com/members/item/93061398>

Jesus has condemned the people in authority and power.

He has called his followers to accountability and responsibility

He was gone on to define this as:

*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.’*

*…that which you did for the least of these, you did for Me.*

SO!...Who would Jesus have said was more right or more righteous; the woman or the villagers?

If the depth of our relationships with Jesus Christ is at stake, and IT IS!, we had better understand whether it is the woman or the villagers.

And that is dependent on our relationship to 2 words: Justice and Charity.

Our relationship to them; not just our understanding.

Justice seeks to end the conditions that create suffering in our world.

Charity seeks to ease the suffering.

* Justice acts and advocates to educate against, and change the policies and norms that cause suffering?
* Charity acts to tend to the woundedness that those policies and norms continue to cause.

Jesus did both. That is the nature, the very essence, of the Gospel.

* He opposed and condemned the people with power and privilege who sustained and benefitted from the policies and norms that cause suffering.
* He also healed the sick, welcomed the stranger, embraced the marginalized and rejected, and tended to the grieving and lost.

Woman or Villagers: Jesus, of course, would have said BOTH

The church has always advocated for and acted for change.

It has tried to follow Jesus’ example. It has tried to live the Gospel that Jesus taught.

The church, throughout history, has spoken out and acted against unjust policies and norms.

Following Christ and the Gospel is what led to the end of slavery. (our UCC was the first to ordain an African American to pastor a predominantly white congregation and led court cases, political movements and government challenges to bring an end to slavery)

Following Christ and the Gospel led to woman’s rights (our UCC was the first to ordain a woman to Christian ministry and led court cases, political movements and government challenges to bring about greater equal rights)

It led to LGBTQ +rights (our UCC was the first to ordain an openly gay man led court cases, political movements and government challenges for fair and just treatment, including legalizing same gender marriages)

It led to Environmental Justice (our UCC was the among the first to name environmental degradation as a human sin and led court cases, political movements and government challenges to protect the environment and climate including a green new deal)

And each of those met with resistance, within the church and beyond.

Change comes hard.

* How many psychoanalyst does it take to change a lightbulb?
* Only one. But, it takes years and years of therapy, and ultimately the lightbulb has to want to change.
* How many introverts does it take to change a light bulb?
* Why must it be a group activity?
* How many mystery novel writers does it take to change a lightbulb?
* Two. One to screw it in almost all the way, and another one to give it a surprising twist at the end.

And each of those hallmarks of church history met with resistance, within the church and beyond.

Change comes hard.

And churches were condemned from their members and community for being too political.

In fact, one of the most beloved hymnals, for decades, in our congregational churches, *The Pilgrim Hymnal*, was condemned, banned and rejected when it first came out as being too political: too much of the social justice gospel in it.

And in truth, it is not as though any of those movements for social change is any where near complete.

* There is still racism in our world and our church
* There is still sexism in our world and our church
* There is still heterosexism in our world and in our church.
* There are still climate change deniers in our world and in our church.

We have work to do. And we are doing it.

Our vision includes our aspiration to work to advocate and care for the multiple dimensions of physical and spiritual needs: to advocate and care for the least of these:

We have claimed Anti Racism, Environmental care and LGBTQ+ support and dignity as our primary focal values.

We are following Christ in advocating and acting for changes in the policies and norms that cause suffering.

We are also acting to end suffering.

* Our Take Out Tuesday will be increasing the amount of food we prepare because more people are coming in need and we want to respond.
* With loaves and fishes we are teaching our young folks about caring for the least of these.
* We have walked to end the stigma of mental illness
* We have and are responding to the natural disasters, so predominant this year. In a world where disasters will now come with greater frequency and greater intensity because of human changes to the ecosystem.
* And keep an eye out for news of SockTober.

We do this because we recognize the invitation, and the truth, in the Gospel that if we are to have a relationship with Jesus, we will need to have a relationship with Both Charity and Justice:

BOTH the Woman and the Villagers.