

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Reno, NV

Pastor Scott Trevithick

Date: November 26, 2023, Year A, Christ the King Sunday

Text: Matthew 25:31-46

Title: How Would You Build the Church?

Focus: What does it mean to be the Church or to follow Jesus? Dale Ressler posed this question to 7th and 8th grade students in Confirmation Class & was pleased and surprised by their answer. This passage from Matthew provides answers to the same question. The faithful are those who served Christ by ministering to those who are poor, hungry, naked, sick, or estranged. Acknowledging Christ as our merciful ruler, we go forth that his reign may be known in our loving words and deeds.

Gospel Reading: Matthew 25:31-46

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. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴Then 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; ³⁵for 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, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ ³⁷Then 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? ³⁸And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ ⁴⁰And 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.’ ⁴¹Then 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; ⁴²for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³I 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.’ ⁴⁴Then 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?’ ⁴⁵Then 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.”

How Would You Build the Church?

- **Can you say what the mission or purpose is of an organization of which you are a part?** Do you know its *mission statement*? It might be a business, a nonprofit, or another organization. You might work there or be a donor or volunteer.

A good mission statement describes what you do in a concise and compelling way. There was a time when I worked beyond the church outside of parish ministry and was the Executive Director of SAFE, Special Advocates for Elders.

- The mission of SAFE was to advocate for and protect vulnerable elders facing guardianship.

Even after all these years, I can recall that mission statement. A mission statement describes your purpose or what you *do*. What action words or verbs did you hear?

- Advocate for
- Protect

An interactive Engager

Check out our visual aid. . . *Display the line drawing of a church building.*



- What **verbs** would you use to describe the mission of the Church? In the words of the sermon title, “**How Would You Build the Church?**”
 - What’s a *verb*, an action word, to describe “What does the Church *do*?” (Or, maybe, “What *should* the Church do?”)
 - Or, “What does a follower of Jesus do?”
 - Dale is going to write one verb on each card. Then we’re going to post them like bricks on the wall of this drawing of a church to build the Church.

Solicit input from the congregation and write and post their responses.

With this engager, I'm following the lead of Dale by modifying an exercise he used with 7th and 8th grade students in our Confirmation Class. With the Confirmation class, the context from Scripture was the book of Acts. Dale's point was to reinforce that the book of Acts describes the formation of the Church after Jesus' earthly life and ascension into heaven. Acts describes how the Church discovers and lives out its mission.

This passage from Matthew 25 hones in on the mission of the Church as it describes how the blessed ones contribute to the Kingdom of Heaven.

What are the verbs/action words from this passage described the mission of the Church or followers of Jesus?

I could create a slide that highlights the verbs in the passage or I could have the AV team return to the scripture slide we used during the reading.

- Give food to the hungry
- Give a drink to the thirsty
- Clothe the naked
- Welcome the stranger
- Care for those who are sick
- Visit those in prison
- Care for the least of these

Dale did this same exercise with the Confirmation class. He asked, "What does the church do?" Here were some of the verbs they used to describe what the Church does: *Use different colored cards for confirmation student responses.*

- Preach
- Welcome
- Share
- Feed the hungry
- Baptize
- Serve Communion
- Give cookies

Here's what I think is so great. Here are 7th and 8th graders, growing in their understanding of themselves and in their ability to put words to their faith. Three of the four of them that particular day used the word **welcome** to describe what the church does.

I think that's great for two reasons.

First of all, it fits with how Jesus here in Matthew characterizes as the mission to which he calls us. If we were to take all these verbs in this passage and distill them into one verb or one phrase, Jesus calls us to welcome the outsider or, as Jesus calls them here, "the least of these."

Secondly, the students' recognition of **welcome** as a key action or ministry or call of the Church hits the target of what we are trying to do at Good Shepherd. These are 7th and 8th graders—right in the heart of identity formation processes—thinking about who they are in relationship to their parents, in relationship with their peers, and in relationship with God as they reflect on their faith. They are differentiating themselves and finding words to express who they are. That these 7th and 8th grade students would recognize that **welcome** is at the heart of who we are as a community of faith at Good Shepherd and who the Church is called to be is touching to me.

An Everyday Saint—Rosalynn Carter

Three weeks ago, on All Saints Sunday, I talked about "Everyday Saints." I described All Saints Sunday as a day of giving thanks for everyday saints who encourage and inspire us to live faithfully by their own example of self-giving love.

That description fits what Jesus says here in Matthew 25:

- Saints are those who exhibit self-giving love or acts of kindness toward "the least of these."

Here in this passage and throughout Matthew, Jesus describes God's kingdom or realm as distinct from the norms of our world. God's kingdom does not function as a typical kingdom in which people with power use that power to benefit themselves. The realm which Jesus introduces seeks to serve others rather than exploit them.

Just this past week, we witnessed the death of an "everyday saint" in the way I described on All Saints Sunday with the death of Rosalynn Carter. She and husband

former President Jimmy Carter, both people of integrity and Christian faith, exhibited behavior in line with Matthew 25. Following his presidency in the 1980s, they were in a position to use their personal power for self-enrichment or to further the cause of peace and reconciliation in the world.

One sign of his and their continued commitment to the cause of international peace was his being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2002.

- Prize Motivation: “for his decades of untiring effort to find peaceful solutions to international conflicts, to advance democracy and human rights, and to promote economic and social development.”¹

Years ago, in the late 1980s, I heard former President Carter speak. One thing I recall was a self-deprecating story he told about his post-presidency life as seen through the lens of the Secret Service agents who provided security for him and his family. He described how agents might accompany other former presidents on international trips and stay in the fanciest of hotels. He said with a laugh that Secret Service agents traveling with him and Rosalynn might sleep on the floor of church basements and fellowship halls while joining the former president and first lady on a Habitat for Humanity Builders Blitz.

Here's how she was described by the President and CEO of the Los Angeles chapter of Habitat:

- “Having built alongside her, I was in awe of her quiet strength and tenacity. Although she started her first Habitat for Humanity build by saying she would only help with the food, she soon found herself hammering on the first day and became quite an accomplished carpenter.”²

¹ The Nobel Peace Prize, 2002, Jimmy Carter facts.
<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2002/carter/facts/>

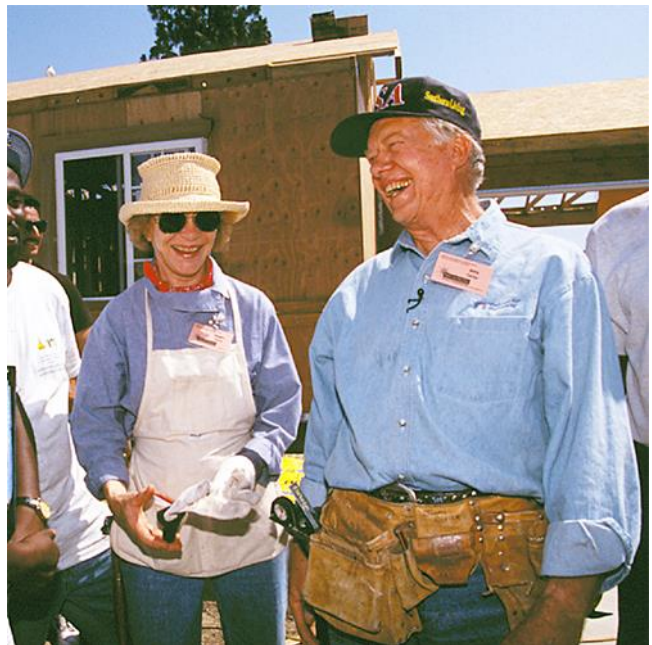
² Erin Rank, President and CEO of Habitat for Humanity, Greater Los Angeles Chapter.
<https://www.habitatla.org/blog/statement-erin-rank-president-ceo-habitat-humanity-greater-la-passing-first-lady-rosalynn-carter/>

And here's how Jimmy Carter expressed his faith:

- “I have one life and one chance to make it count for something... My faith demands that I do whatever I can, wherever I am, whenever I can, for as long as I can with whatever I have to try to make a difference.”³

How would you build the Church? Thanks be to God for those who seek to welcome and care for those who are poor, hungry, naked, sick, or estranged.

Photos from “Memorable Moments with the Carters” on the Habitat for Humanity website⁴



³ As seen at Goodreads. <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/304822-i-have-one-life-and-one-chance-to-make-it>

⁴ <https://www.habitat.org/carter-work-project/photo-gallery-memorable-moments-with-carters>

