

“Faith and Works”

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**First Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 25:31-46**

It was the end of the school year, and a kindergarten teacher was receiving gifts from her pupils. The florist's son handed her a gift. She shook it, held it overhead, and said, "I bet I know what it is. Flowers." "That's right!" the boy said, "But, how did you know?" "Oh, just a wild guess" she said. The next pupil was a sweet shop owner's daughter. The teacher held her gift overhead, shook it, and said, "I bet I can guess what it is. A box of sweets." "That's right, but how did you know?" asked the girl. "Oh, just a wild guess" said the teacher. The next gift was from the son of the liquor store owner. The teacher held the package overhead, but it was leaking,. She touched a drop of the leakage with her finger and put it to her tongue. "Is it wine?" she asked. "No" the boy replied, with some excitement. The teacher repeated the process, tasting a larger drop of leakage. "Is it Champagne?" she asked. "No" the boy replied, with more excitement. The teacher took one more bite before declaring, "I give up, what is it?" With great glee, the boy replied, "It's a puppy!" SURPRISE!

This morning's text from Matthew is a story of great surprise! In fact everybody is surprised! Allow me to share another story of surprise that I have told before.

Within the Rabbinic tradition there is a story in which a famished man comes to the tent of Moses. Moses, upon seeing him orders his servants to bring a spread of food. Eyes wide, the fellow digs in. Immediately, Moses sets upon his guest and begins beating him savagely with a cane. God, the Maker appears and stays Moses' hand asking, "Why do you harm this poor man?" Moses replies, "He began to eat without offering prayer. That is a sacrilege!" God replies, "Perhaps it is a good thing for humanity, that I am not as religious as you".

“Perhaps it is a good thing for humanity, that I am not as religious as you”.

How does that sit with you?
How religious are you?
Is there a chance you are more religious than God?

Challenging! For all people of faith!

Here sits a famished human being, and the great Moses invites him in to feed him. So far so good. Keep in mind - for Judaism - Moses is up there. He's no slouch. He is the Deliverer! He is the Law giver! He is at the top, and yet, this Rabbinic story - uses Moses as the one who sees, and yet fails to truly see. Certainly Moses saw the need and began to help the man, to feed him. The fellow human chows down! No prayer-just starvation.

Moses mercilessly beats him - for not following the accepted liturgical form of the day. He didn't pray!

By God, he must be punished! That ungrateful wretch.

What an affront to the Almighty! Where is my cane? I'll show this poor ignorant creature - an example of religion in practice.

Take That!

And That!"

And God's loving hand reaches out, as Moses is about to inflict another bruising scar on his guest.

Moses "But God, he didn't pray. He didn't do the liturgy".

Thank God - God is not as religious as some of us in this world!

We develop our groups, our communities, our particular traditions, our specific liturgies, and in the process of defining and living our faith, our spiritual lives - we often substitute the liturgical accouterments for, the foundational elements of our faith.

You may have noticed we here at First Presbyterian Church worship in a particular way. We have a liturgy. We have a beginning - "Call to Worship" and an ending a "Benediction", and all that other stuff in between.

Our friends down the street at St. Stephens are very similar, yet different. St Nick's, a few streets over - has a different liturgy. St. Mary's has a Baptismal Fountain, where the initiate walks down into the water. Similar to the liturgy of Baptists - yet different.

Our particular religious expressions are legitimate. They have long standing traditions upholding them. And yet - too often our particular liturgical expressions are taken to be the reality that is in fact behind them - sustaining them. That is our perennial danger.

We mistake the symbol for the substance. We have too many Moses' around - attacking on those who don't fit their religion.

Thank God - God is not so religious!

Imagine we are all standing at the final judgment. Some are on the right; some are on the left hand of God. Now, as you are imagining this, where are you?

My guess, most of you are standing proud at the maker's right-hand. A good place to be! I believe I hear a lot of bleating going on. (Few baas.) Everyone is there. No exceptions. No reserved seats. The judgment begins.

Now consider this. Try to just hear this story. What does this story ask of all those people? Does it ask about:

Particular liturgies?

Particular theologies?

Particular Religions?

Particular memberships?

I don't hear anything like that! What I hear is a universal litany of met and unmet human needs. That's it! Theology, Christology, Ecclesiology, et. al - are conspicuously absent. Jesus is there and

the interest of the judge of all the earth - is what have you done? The goats are getting uncomfortable. They are the type ready to get the cane out and do some damage. Why, they don't even get it. They are oblivious to what is really going. They are tilting their heads, looking at each other wondering - "is this guy for real?" "When did this not happen?"

I imagine - many of the goats had their prayer books, rosaries, necklace crosses, and WWJD bracelets. And they did not have a clue! Some goats had their canes, always prepared to "enlighten" those outsiders, searchers - who failed the Religious liturgy test.

The judge declares - "get out of my sight!" The goats respond - "But why?" They are incredulous. Sadly, goats seldom realize what they are doing and not doing - they carry their canes proudly.

The spiritual journey - is a journey intimately wedded to "others". And God knows this better than we know this truth.

Begin to find deeper spirituality in these words:

"I was hungry and you gave me food.

I was thirsty and you gave me drink

I was a stranger and you welcomed me.

I was without clothes and you gave me clothes

I was sick and you took care of me

I was in prison and you visited me".

No canes were in the hands of those who cared for those in need. They were even surprised. They only did what their spirits led them to do - to reach out to another human being.

"When you have done this to the least of these, you have done the deed to me." How much more spiritual/human can one become?

God forbid, that God would ever say this to you. "Perhaps it is a good thing for humanity, that I am not as religious as you!" And instead, hear these words, "Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."

Amen.