

“No Shoes, No Shirt----Service Anyway!”

November 20, 2005

Matthew 25:31-46

I hope you all will have a joyful and pleasant Thanksgiving. This Sunday begins one of my favorite times of the year.

Thanksgiving as we celebrate it became a legal holiday in 1941. Prior to that Congress or the President of the United States were responsible for declaring a day of thanks.

In 1863, Abraham Lincoln proclaimed a day of thanksgiving to celebrate the Union victory at Gettysburg. Southern states refused to recognize the day for obvious reasons. It was President Andrew Johnson who continued Lincoln’s tradition by declaring a day of thanks in November of each year. Again many southern states were reluctant to observe the day.

When President Franklin Roosevelt declared in 1939 that the third Thursday of November would be an official day of thanks there was debate about the declaration. Partisan politics entered the picture and went on for two years debating “Franksgiving” as it was called. Finally in 1941, the fourth Thursday was declared as the official day of thanks.¹

Most cultures have observed celebrations around giving thanks for harvests or other occasions. The Hebrews observed the ***Feast of Tabernacles*** which was a day to express thanks to God. Giving thanks is an important part of worship liturgies. As Christians we are exhorted to give thanks always.

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The text for today is from the 25th chapter of Matthew’s gospel. At first reading this text may not seem very appropriate for the Sunday before Thanksgiving. The scene is a time of judgment when God is determining the eternal destiny of folks. Some of the folks are thankful while others are not. In the scene people are gathered before the Christ at the end of the age. Christ

¹ see http://history1900s.about.com/b/a/2003_11_26.htm.

begins to separate the “sheep” and the “goats”. What is surprising in the scene is the criterion for separation.

One interesting thing to note is what is **NOT** mentioned as a criterion for reward or punishment. There is no mention of baptism, a particular time or form of baptism, believing the Bible, going to church, giving a tithe, belonging to the correct church or any of the other ways that we often try to separate people into “sheep” and “goats”. The one criterion mentioned---the one overriding point of departure---is how we treat the “least” among us.

Please also note the surprise on the part of those who have given mercy that they are receiving mercy. They extended mercy not to gain mercy, but they extended mercy and love because it was the right thing to do. They are surprised that their acts of kindness actually have eternal ramifications. Like so many they may have believed that the criterion for reward and punishment was what religious people taught---going to church, obeying the law, giving some money, and believing the correct things. They are surprised to discover that their acts of kindness---done just because they were the right thing to do---have earned them a place in heaven.

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There is nothing unique to this emphasis of Jesus on mercy and kindness. Many of the great religions make similar statements.

From the **Hebrew Scriptures**: ***“Blessed is he who considers the poor, the Lord delivers him in the day of trouble.”***²

From **Islam**: ***“They feed with food the needy wretch, the orphan, and the prisoner, for love of Him, saying, ‘we wish for no reward nor thanks from you.’”***³

From **Buddhism**: ***There are three kinds of persons existing in the world: one is like a drought, one who rains locally, and one who pours down everywhere. How is a person like a drought? He gives nothing to all alike, not giving food or drink, clothing and vehicle, flowers, scents, and unguents,***

² Psalm 41:1

³ Qur’an 76.8-9

bed, lodging and light, neither to recluses and Brahmins to wretched and needy beggars. In this way, a person is like a drought.

How is a person like a local rainfall? He is a giver to some, but to others gives not.

How does a person rain down everywhere? He gives to all, be they recluses and Brahmins or wretched, needy beggars, he is a giver of food and drink, clothing...lodging and lights. In this way a person rains down everywhere.”⁴

Treating each other with respect is to be woven into the fabric of human life. It is what makes us civilized. It is what makes us “human”. To do otherwise makes us less than human and uncivilized. To do so---to respect all including the least among us----brings us into the presence of God.

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I believe we have trouble with Jesus’ idea. As we look at the world around us, look at the church, or look into a mirror at our own souls to greater or lesser degrees we create visible and invisible divisions of people. We are willing to help some people but not other people.

Like the sign we sometimes see, “**No shoes, no shirt---no service!**”. We often create rules and regulations that shun some and welcome others. Some barriers may be helpful, perhaps necessary but others are not helpful. It was not too long ago that another sign was commonly accepted across our culture---“whites only”. In this scene the chilly reminder is that those who did not help the smelly, homeless person because they thought no one would even notice may have a big surprise at the end.

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In the popular movie, ***It’s a Wonderful Life*** starring James Stewart the idea of grace is restated again and again.⁵ In the story George Bailey, played by Jimmy Stewart, is a compassionate yet frustrated and disappointed

⁴ Itivuttaka 65

⁵ “It’s a Wonderful Life”, 1946, directed by Frank Capra based on a story by Philip Van Doren Stern.

businessman. He has spent his life helping people through his small Savings and Loan Company resisting efforts by Mr. Potter to control the town. At one point he is so frustrated that he wonders what it would be like if he had never been born. An angel, Clarence, grants him his wish and George Bailey gets to see what the world would be like had he never been born. Bedford Falls, without George, becomes a place of gambling and corruption run by Mr. Potter. Dozens of lives are negatively impacted because George Bailey was not there to lend a helping hand. By the end of the movie one realizes how many people humble George Bailey influenced, saved, and helped through his quiet compassion for the “least”.

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During the seasons of Thanksgiving, Advent, and Christmas the themes of charity, kindness and helping the “least” are lifted up again and again. During this time funds pour into food pantries, persons volunteer and cook meals for the homeless, those alone receive visits, toys are collected for the needy and the very best of us comes to the surface. The message is that such love and charity should characterize us all the days of our life---not just one or two.

The Matthew passage affirms that care for the least among us is a priority of faith. According to Matthew it just might be the highest priority of all.

Many people have not heard of the Catholic bishop, Dom Helder Camara. He died several years ago. He was a Brazilian Archbishop who became known throughout the world for his liberation theology—a theology that lifted up the poor. At barely five feet in height he was a giant spiritually. Refusing to don the traditional garb for his high office, Camara could be seen in his plain brown cassock and simple wooden cross.

In 1960, Bishop Camara brought to Rome the agenda for a “preferential option for the poor.” He even suggested that the Pope give the Vatican and all its art work to the United Nations to help in the work with the poor. He said that

the Bishop of Rome should be like the great Shepherd Jesus. The suggestion was never given much thought.

However, his plea for the poor became an important part of Vatican II and reaffirmed the importance of Matthew 25.

When Mother Teresa once asked Camara how he managed to maintain his humility, he replied that he only had to imagine himself making the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. He saw himself not as Jesus but as the donkey. Bishop Camara died in 1999 at age 90. He is remembered for his gentle spirit and for his support of the least.

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Jesus reminds us that what is important is not our position in life, our class, our wealth, or even if we are members of the correct church. What counts is that we help one another, support one another, and forgive one another---even the least among us.

On this Thanksgiving we have much for which to offer thanks. I am thankful that I have the resources to help persons in need. I am thankful that through grace I have been invited to the greatest thanksgiving feast of all. So no matter what our situation, no matter what may be happening in this moment we can gather this week to offer thanks---not because all is as we would want it---but because we are among Christ's family. The sign we will see in the kingdom and the sign we should have written on our hearts is "***no shoes, no shirt---service anyway!***"