

“You Did it to Me”
Amos 5:6-15; 1 John 3:12-24;
Matthew 25:31-46

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We just finished up a sermon series where we used the acronym WORSHIP to look at the spiritual disciplines. It was during that time that one of the spiritual disciplines—Incarnate the Love of Christ—stood out to me. I realized how little time I’ve given to the idea of God coming among us incarnate, in flesh, as Jesus, to walk with us and what that might mean.

When I begin to think about people who are extremely important to me, I wonder what it would mean for me to be able to meet such a person. We think about Jesus coming and the disciples walking with him, and wonder at what that must have been like. It’s a little like those times I wonder what it would be like to be with a hero of mine. Perhaps you can think of a hero of your own life who, if you were in their presence, you would be a little humbled and perhaps a little nervous wondering exactly what to say. I think about what it might be like to enter into the presence of Jesus. If Jesus were to be in the next room and we knew we could go in and talk to him, what would it be like?

There’s a story that I think begins with Leo Tolstoy about a cobbler named Conrad. Conrad was a devout man, and one night he was praying. He felt like during his prayer that Jesus said, “I will visit you tomorrow.” So when Conrad woke up the next day, he prepared to meet Jesus. He got a nice cloak out and readied it for him. He found a nice pair of shoes that he knew he wanted to present to him. He got food ready so that they could have a meal together, and then he started to go about his day. As the morning wore on, he wondered when Jesus would show up.

There was a knock at his door and he thought, “Maybe that’s him.” He opened the door, and there was a beggar. It was cold and starting to snow. He saw that the beggar only had rags for shoes. So he invited him in and he gave him the shoes he needed and sent him on his way.

About noon, he was preparing lunch and hoping that Jesus would show up so they could sup together. About that time there was a knock on the door and it was a young mother with a young child, shivering in the cold, wondering if they could warm themselves for just a minute. She was on her way to her in-laws because her husband had died and she had been evicted. He invited her in. He invited her to sit by the fire. He knew he had plenty for lunch so he invited her to eat. As she got up to be on her way, he gave her the cloak so that she might be able to brave the cold.

As the afternoon wore on, there was another knock at the door. He was excited and thought, “This time it will be Jesus!” There was a young girl, lost, feeling homeless at that moment and wondering what to do. He brought her in and got her warmed up and began to ask her questions and figured out where she must live. He soon took her home. He came back and spent the evening wondering where Jesus had been.

That night during his prayers, he heard it. He heard Jesus say, “I came to you three times today in the beggar, in the young woman, and in the child.

When we think about Jesus as being God with us, there is this incredible sense that God so cares about human life that he would become one of us. In Philippians 2, we read: “Finding himself in human form, he humbled himself” that he might do God’s will. I can’t help but thinking about that phrase because it often feels like as a human being, I sometimes find myself in human form and want to aggrandize myself instead of humble myself to do the will of God.

When Jesus is talking in this passage from Matthew he says “...you did it to me.” Oftentimes when I hear that phrase I’m a little hesitant. It’s like somebody is going to accuse me of doing something to them. Or I’ll say, “You did it to me. You’re the problem.” Jesus is turning that on its head and saying, “you did it to me” in thanksgiving for what someone has done—the care they have shown, the grace they have given, the hope they have shared. It turns the phrase into something we want to hear. “You did it to me. You enabled me to have life.” It is a feeling that we are given about the one who is with us. Not only one who was with us in Galilee so many years ago, but continues to be with us and shows up in the very people around us.

No matter how we sketch out our lives, God is with us and invites us to recognize that following him, that entering into the very grace and love he would show us, is to show that grace and love to one another, particularly to those in need. So often, we think about this and leave it there. Our national church is inviting us to enter into this perhaps in a little more direct way, in a conscious way, asking us to become what’s called a Matthew 25 church. The mission agency of our national church is challenging us to recognize that Jesus invites us to care for one another, to love, and to look at the needs of the least of these as a way of recognizing Christ among us and Christ’s love shared.

There are three focuses of that initiative. The first is the vitality of a congregation, inviting us to recognize that the vitality of a congregation is not just in how well it sings or how nice we are to each other, but how we share the love of God with our neighbors and our community. How can we be part of a community in a way that brings the very light and grace of God into the community itself?

The second is dismantling structural racism. It’s a recognition that we live in a society that has in its foundations a certain amount of racism and that we can begin to address that problem.

Third is eradicating systemic poverty. Poverty is also a restrictor. It holds people back. If we look at the various things that Jesus says in Matthew 25—feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, clothe the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned—so often this is the plight of the poor. It’s the very thing Jesus is inviting us to see, that he will be there amongst the least of these.

I about laughed when I read about eradicating systemic poverty because it's *huge*. I'm not going to step out the door and go eradicate systemic poverty. Sometimes I need to hear what Mother Theresa said: "If you can't feed a hundred people, at least feed one." Remember that we can make a start, and we have started. We are involved in these things already and it's not something brand new. We are already doing Family Promise. We are already doing Stephen Ministry. We are already caring for our community in a variety of ways. We have Angel Closet and Home Start. We have a Prayer Shawl Ministry. We have ways we already believe and act as people who want to follow Jesus and hear those words, "You did it to me."

As we recognize that we are already doing some of this, it's also an invitation to think about and to be present with these problems. So often we know that those problems are there but we don't say much about them. We approach them in various ways, remembering that Jesus invites us to feed, to give water, to clothe, to visit, to care. It's an invitation our national church is reminding us of in this particular time, and one our Session has decided we want to pay attention to. We want to be a church that recognizes the call of Matthew 25, the very call of Christ.

When Christ came into our world and humbled himself to be a human, he began to carry out the will of God by caring for others. Healing them. Teaching them. Leading them. Dying for them. Dying for you and me. So we are invited, as it says in 1 John, to not only love in speech, but in actions. Amos suggests we want to do good and not evil. We want to be the people of God. The invitation is that as we begin, as we attempt to show the very love and grace of God, there's a way in which the love and grace of God abides in us.

We say in communion that Jesus is the vine and we are the branches and that we can abide in him and he in us. It says it again in 1 John, that we do that as we listen to his calling and recognize what he asks of us—that we learn to love one another and particularly to care for the least of these among us. Amen.