

Last week my daughter Catherine shared with me one of the epigrams she encountered in one of her internet searches. It quoted someone as having observed, “Sometimes the appropriate response to reality is to go insane.”

When we work out some of the implications of what Matthew’s Jesus has to say in this morning’s text it begins to seem as if maybe Jesus is the insane one. About the time we think we are sane and Jesus is crazy, it’s worth noting it is we who live in this broken world, we who have begun to think it’s normal to live in anxiety and competition and stress and depression and war. It is Jesus who keeps inviting each of us back to wholeness, to sanity, to community—into eternal Reality; into the Kingdom of God. It is Jesus who keeps inviting us Home.

At first what Jesus tells His disciples sounds reasonable. Almost everybody thinks kindness and charity are good things; who could be against helping the needy—those without food or drink or clothes or prospects. Americans grumble about it, but in the end pay tens of billions of tax dollars toward helping the poor each year.

Of us His disciples, Jesus asks much more. To a point, His teachings sound reasonable: once we have come deeply to realize we are daughters and sons of the Most High King, it is easy—inevitable—for us to look upon everyone else we meet down here as fellow guests in the Father’s House—whom we, His family, treat with kindness and love. When we understand who and Whose we are, we naturally choose to obey our Master who so joyfully served those around Him, who so eagerly washed the feet of His disciples. We come to discover the joy in serving others and in pleasing our Lord. (Conversely, as long as we keep forgetting we have “been blessed to be a blessing,” or keep on thinking that our goal in living is our own comfort, we are simply revealing we’re still living by the old rules, the old craziness outside the Kingdom. We haven’t yet made the transition to trusting in the Host, trusting in the King. Nothing personal—very few of us do this really well yet. We learned the old rules all too well.)

As we study this final teaching of Jesus (final in Matthew, anyway) it seems more and more odd. [[We can’t dwell on it, but it’s worth noting that Jesus is portrayed as both much more than and something less than a Messiah or an itinerant sage. In Matthew’s story of the sheep and the goats, Jesus portrays Himself as both the humble Son of Man but also the King of the ages. Jesus is the One whom “all the angels” attend; He is the One sitting on the throne; He is the One who comes in glory. (Only God is attended by angels, or sits on a throne, or commands the angels: Jesus is no mere country carpenter.) At the same time Jesus is so much less than the rest of us.]]

Jesus, “God among us,” identifies not with queens or caesars or billionaires—but with the hungry, the convicts in prison, the illegal immigrants, the homeless, the destitute. How we treat them, He tells us, is really His scorecard as to how we have been treating Him all along. (What? All these years we’ve been coming to Worship every Sunday, praying and studying the Scriptures, supporting the church and the hospital guild and our alma mater, driving our kids all over the county for these lessons and those; all the zillions of great things we’ve been doing, and He gives no credit to these whatsoever?) The only thing Jesus cares about is how we have been interacting with those at the fringes, those falling thru the cracks of society? Could this be?

Let's pause to consider our context for this lesson. We continue this morning in the series of "spiritual disciplines." These disciplines are not listed in the Bible or in church history. There are not seven listed, or nine or six. (The early Church theologians did settle on seven deadly sins, seven being the number of completeness.) Spiritual disciplines do not exist to win us brownie points in the sight of God—this would be a non-possibility, since there is nothing we can do to make God love us any more, and there is nothing we can do to make God love us any less.

We practice spiritual disciplines because we find that they help us to adapt to life in the Father's Home, life in the Kingdom as disciples of Jesus, more quickly and reliably than if we left it all up to chance. These disciplines help us change our deepest habits, help protect us from going back into the insanity in which we lived before we chose to come Home. Practicing the spiritual disciplines helps us to overcome the fundamental human outrage of discovering, after all, that "I am not God." (This outrage goes all the way back to the drama in the Garden: "Go ahead, eat it; you don't have to obey God...eat it and you will be like God.")

[[Practicing these spiritual disciplines may appear circular, in which cause and effect get all mixed together. Do we pray and meet together in small groups and find a mentor and serve those in need in order better to draw near to God, to hear the Voice of the Holy Spirit—or because we have already drawn near, already begun to hear the Voice? Do we practice the disciplines in order to welcome the Spirit more deeply into our lives, to allow the Spirit to direct our steps and our decisions us even more directly—or because we know the Spirit is already abiding deep within, already directing our steps? Yes.]]

One observation about the sheep and the goats: Jesus asks us to do simple things anyone can do. This discipline of drawing near to Jesus by drawing near to the outcasts around us is stunning in its simplicity. As John Chryostom (Fifth Century Bishop, Constantinople) observed, Jesus is only asking things all of us can do. We don't need to be super heroes. He doesn't ask us to execute an incredibly dramatic jailbreak to get the prisoners all out—He only asks us to visit them. We don't need to go miraculously cure someone with multiple sclerosis—only stop by, encourage them. Take in the homeless. (Not like the hospital in County Cork which Henry Ford reportedly once visited. The enterprising hospital board heard this wealthy industrialist would be visiting their city; they invited him to a gala fundraiser. He gave a most generous gift: 5,000 pounds. (Maybe \$3,000,000 today?) They conspired with the local newspaper to trumpet in giant headlines the next day "Henry Ford's Incredible Gift of 50,000 pounds" Ford was understandably chagrined that they should have gotten this wrong. They offered to run a retraction in the next day's giant headlines: "Correction: Henry Ford Only Giving 5,000 Pounds." He thought about that option, and stipulated he would give the 50,000 pounds on one condition: that Jesus' words would be prominently etched above the entrance to the new hospital his gift was building: "I Came Among You and You Took Me In".)

(This teaching of Jesus addresses two frequently asked concerns about Jesus. "What becomes of people who never knew Jesus, never had the opportunity to respond to the gospel? Will they go to heaven?" Matthew makes the answer very clear: if you served the least, the last and the lost (Robert Capon's phrase) you have met and served Jesus. That counts. Never mind theological conundrums: you get full credit if you do the

simple things: be kind. Don't overlook the little people, or think yourself superior to the poor. We are all alike children of God.

And how many of us lament that our prayers sometimes seem altogether one-sided. Jesus seems far away. How may we get in closer touch with the living God? (You could plan to come to the next Prayer Retreat, Nov 14-16—and you may find it teaching a more conventional means for being in better prayer communication with the Holy Spirit of God.) But our text is telling us clear answer from Jesus: “You want to be more near to Me, experience Me? Be near the poor, experience them.” Simple.

Of course this is simple, but not easy for us. Even though we don't need to be social workers or experts—we simply have to be willing to be kind, to become more aware, to extend ourselves, to open our hearts in Christ's love—this is not easy.

On the one hand I am not trying to lay guilt upon you; to try to induce you to get involved in the next trip to Open Arms in Baja or to downtown Los Angeles or to the church in Santa Ana. God is able to prod you better than I. Martin Luther observed “Every home is a little hospital;” every mom and dad is already meeting Jesus in spoonfeeding the baby his mashed tapioca, in helping a naked little one get from the tub into her p.j.s, in visiting the child stuck in “time out.” Henrietta Mears observed, “Every person we meet is dying for a drop of love.”

[Jesus also knows the responsibilities to which we are called. Each of us is born with a destiny; each of His disciples is given a God-assignment to discover and pursue at all costs. (We are each one called to draw near to Jesus and serve Him in serving those in need around us—but not each of us is called to specialize as a doctor, or a jail warden, or a Hospice worker.)]

On the other hand, I do not want to be trying to deny the clear intent of our text, or to lead you in becoming like WC Fields, who shocked people by requesting a Bible as he lay on his deathbed. “Looking for loopholes,” he explained. (Let's look for the joy and fulfillment in serving Jesus rather than for loopholes.)

A second observation: there will be surprises all around. Those whom Jesus commends as righteous are surprised: “You—when did we ever shelter You, feed You, visit You?” “Amen I tell you, as you did it to the least of My brothers or sisters, it's the same as doing it for Me.”

They are pleasantly surprised. They remind me of those French families in World War II who risked their lives over and over again harboring escaping Jews out of Europe. A fascinating book interviewed and studied the difference between the vast majority who would do nothing to help the Jews and those who risked everything. (The book is *The Altruistic Personality: What Led Ordinary Men and Women to Risk Their Lives on Behalf of Others.*) Most often, the Jews were total strangers to the rescuers. Not surprisingly, those who helped felt an inner compulsion learned from their parents and their faith. One woman responded, for example, “My husband said right after the war started that we had to do something to help these people against the Nazis. It was our Christian duty...”

These people did not see themselves as heroic—just ordinary people doing what people do. (In contrast, those who did not help were characterized by a sense of detachment and exclusiveness.) A center of help for escaping Jews was the Vichy village of Le Chambon. The researcher and author Philip Mallie spent time living among them. He asked them who the refugees were, these homeless Jews and their children. Nobody

in the village knew who they were: said one, “I only did my duty...we are all children of God and it is impossible to distinguish between one human being and another.”

These were all sturdy Calvinists; under the courageous leadership of the Rev. Philip Trocme and his wife Magda, they saved the lives of thousand of Jewish refugees in their homes and barns. Madame Magda Trocme would rush from her kitchen to open the door of the manse at all hours, turning the doorknob and admitting another family of terrified refugees with, “Naturally; come in, and come in.”

It’s sobering to recognize that the surprise in Jesus’ story cuts both ways. Those who had so much (including religion) are totally surprised that Jesus should overlook all they have accomplish and zero in on how they served those in need. “But Jesus, when did we ever refuse You, fail to meet Your needs...?” We know His answer: “You failed Me when you failed those in desperate need. I was in them, near you, all along...”

These words probably sound threatening to us. Jesus is not interested in my accomplishments, my goals, all the things I have done and become? Oh, Jesus never quits loving us “goats” who are so slow to recognize we need a Savior more effective than we our selves. He knows we built up a lot of self-defeating habits while we thought we had to “outcrazy the crazies” in the competition and consumerism out there, in having to protect ourselves from the dangerous ones, in running wild amid all that insanity before we chose to share in His sanity and come Home. Jesus knows old habits, old identities, old coping patterns and old aspirations can shackle us tight and throttle us down.

We hear Matthew’s language of eternal fire into which the goats are cast—that gets my attention, and especially when I “put 2 and 2 together” to realize the ones at risk are the very ones proud that “they’re in” and the ones invited for salvation are the ones surprised to hear it. This gospel means at least this: the gift of life from God is a serious gift; the choices we make have consequences. To disobey God, to go trust in ourselves and go our own way, to keep living as insane people do will wind us up in hell, one way or another. (The details in this story are figurative: the sheep and goats are not even individuals, but nations/tribes.) The flames are described as eternal: then surely there is an infinite supply of logs for fuel? Where does the zippo lighter light the actual flames: in Jerusalem’s valley of Hinnon, or in the regions of Hades, or in an airless dimension without oxygen? These details are figurative, but they are important.) Thanks be to God we have other texts in Matthew (e.g. “Blessed is the one who takes no offense in Me...”) We have other gospels than Matthew’s: (e.g. “Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more;”) Thanks be that “God is love” into all eternity. What is impossible to women and men is possible for God...

Thanks be to God our Judge is Jesus—the One who shows us the love of the God who is love. The One who has come to earth so that none should perish. The One who now abides in us in God the Holy Spirit. Jesus is talking about something of a different magnitude from those espousing “random acts of kindness.” Kindness is good—but how well can any of us do in living lives of kindness, serving those in need, apart from the renewing Spirit of the living God? The problem is that we cannot live the God-life, the fulfilling life, as long as we insist on controlling our own lives and living in our own personal insanity and independence. Even our good behavior is a gift from God.

A third observation concerns our church policy. A budget always reflects priorities. This year our church will have given just over \$21,000 to those in great

need—primarily thru the Marshallese Congregation and thru the Open Arms Daycare Center. (The 2009 Request Budget is asking for \$46,000 to go toward those in need. If you think these sums are too small for a church of our resources, I think you know what to do.)

Jesus Himself could have encouraged His disciples to enlist in the Temple alms program. He did not. He could have appointed Peter to head a benevolence agency. He did not; Jesus appointed Peter to head Christ's Church. (The Church has always been known for its generosity: hospitals, orphanages, universities, missionaries laying down their lives for others—but these come as a by-product of the Church being the Church.)

Our Board of Christian Mission shows great care in how they serve others in the name of Jesus. We believe Christ is crucial in changing lives and patterns which lead to deep need and deprivation, so we support those who encourage the financially needy in and thru a local church. We do not spend budgeted church money toward only “daily bread”: our tax dollars are already at work doing that. We do not send money far, far away to be administered by people who have no personal relationship with those receiving funds. (I don't want to sound cynical, but have you ever wondered exactly what happened to those \$12-15+ billion in emergency federal funds apportioned to rebuild New Orleans? Can you guess who has already gotten wealthy, and whose homes have not received “dollar one”?)

When homeless or apparently penniless people come by here Heather and I try to respond appropriately. She and I have both driven persons all over Orange County—occasionally—and I suspect we have both offered Trader Joe's almonds or sweatshirts or water or sometimes conversation and a prayer. We try to discern how we may be helpful, not harmful. I have agonized before sending someone away with no material help. I have invited persons to come back for fellowship and worship rather than give them something to drink. To give cash to someone who comes by drunk at midday is not giving him what he needs.

As Heather reminded us: what we really need is Jesus. Our church partners thru persons and ministries to whom Jesus is important: for example Pastor Charlie; Heidi and Daniel. Too often people who receive “charity” feel less connected to donors or taxpayers rather than more; it's natural for the one on the receiving end to feel self-loathing and anger and contempt toward the givers rather than any gratitude to God. But many of you have heard the stories of Heidi and Daniel who run Open Arms Day Care. As an orphan roaming the streets Daniel was brought to Jesus; he is now spending his life in gratitude—transforming the lives of other children and families who have nothing so that they in turn might be transformed by Jesus. (Government has a role to play—but it can never bring new life in Christ.)

Our church supports ministries in which each one of us can enter into long-term relationship with those involved, and they with us. (I know many of you are quietly serving others individually in wonderful ways.) In serving those in great need we come to realize that they have much to offer us: perhaps a faith which has been tested and tempered by privation; perhaps a generosity out of their poverty which we in our security cannot duplicate; perhaps a vibrant sense of community because they have no illusions about being self-sufficient and they know if they do not support their church it will die and maybe they will die. Not figuratively. Of starvation.

In meeting and serving those in need, those with whom Jesus identifies, we are reminded face-to-face once again that we are all invited by the King to come in out of the insanity. To come Home. We show ourselves to be sons and daughters of the Most High when we show His mercy to all those around us—especially those we think might not “fit in” around here; when we extend ourselves to serve others because we know they are every bit as beloved by God and as welcome in Christ’s Church as we are.

We delight our Lord Jesus when we reach out to others in need, for His sake—
“Naturally, come in, and come in...”

Matthew 25:31-46

Jesus continued teaching, “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. 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 and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom that has been being prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 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.'

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? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' 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.'

Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire that has been being prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 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.' 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?' 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.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."