

As a Pastor, and as a person who loves to read, I love discovering new books, especially ones about faith! Needless to say I'm enjoying my dad's new book, "The World is About to Turn," which is about finding ways to come together when our relationships are strained by all kinds of things that divide us. I also enjoy finding books that are fun and different, like the one I discovered online called "The One Year Choose your own ending devotional!"

Basically, it offers readers a short fictional narrative without a complete ending. After reading a provided scripture passage, readers are encouraged to make up an ending to the story that would follow the Biblical message they just read. Of course, the first thing that popped into my head, after seeing that devotional, were those choose your own adventure books I used to read when I was a kid! I think they appealed to me because I loved reading the different stories and seeing where the different choices would take me.

Imagine the following situation: You're a young high school kid and your parents have just told you that they are going out of town and will be gone for the entire weekend! Later that day, as you are chatting online with your best friend Johnathan, you share the news of your parent's absence and he responds by suggesting you have a group of close friends over for a small get together. Do you? A: Disappoint your friend by saying no, in order to avoid the possibility of getting in trouble if something bad were to happen? Do you B: tell him yes with the condition that you are the only one who gets to do the inviting, so that you can avoid unwanted guests showing up at your house? Or do you C: Throw caution to the wind and respond by telling him to invite anyone he can think of trusting that you have the brains and cunning to pull it off without getting caught?

Today as we near the end of Matthew's Gospel, we are aware that Jesus isn't going to be heading out of town on vacation. Eventually he will be leaving his disciples after his death, resurrection, and ascension, and therefore he needed to

prepare them for finishing the work he began during his ministry on earth. During the different parables we have encountered these past few weeks Jesus has been providing his disciples with some last-minute instructions, and words of warning involving his second coming.

Last Sunday Jesus told his disciples a parable involving a Master, who entrusts his servants with talents they were to actively use and invest with their master's interest in mind while he is gone on a journey. Today, like parents who have returned home to a trashed house, and have punished their children for disobeying them, we encounter another illustration involving a final judgment that will take place with Christ's return. Jesus tells his disciples a story about sheep and goats illustrating to them, and to us, that he will separate the righteous from the unrighteous and that he will determine where each one will spend eternity.

Of course, Jesus' instructions to his followers are far more serious than children getting into trouble for throwing a party. He is trying to get his disciples, and those in the crowd to listen, and to really think about how they are to live out their lives while he is gone! He also wants them to recognize that everyone will be held accountable for their actions during his absence!

As followers of Christ, like the sheep in His story, we are called to live out our faith through our actions! We are called to love our neighbors as we love ourselves! I think we can even take this a step further by treating those around us as if we were actually caring for Jesus, or at the very least as a beloved sister or brother. Remember that during His ministry on earth our Lord actively, and actually, identified with the poor and the outcast. The Son of God stood deliberately and voluntarily in the shoes of the powerless, the weak, the defenseless, the hated, the tortured. In the passion narrative as Jesus heads to the cross we perceive him as a stranger, as a person sick with the world's sin, naked

after having his robes torn from him, hungry from his imprisonment, and thirsty as we hear his cry from the cross, “I thirst!”

Notice that it isn’t just the sheep’s actions that earned them their reward, remember they did what came naturally, you might say their attitude played a part. Consider the fact that those separated from the goats are surprised that they are considered righteous by Jesus. They don’t know their deeds! They haven’t kept score. The righteous were righteous because of their actions, and they didn’t even know it.

I think there are more than a few of us here at First Lutheran who have had similar types of “surprises.” Someone comes up to us and says, “What you did for me sure helped me a lot.” Or “What you said to me had a powerful influence on my life.” Oftentimes, we don’t know what good we are doing –and only later discover that we have served Christ in the least of these. On the other hand if we assume we are doing a great job, we might be surprised, like the goats in our story, to hear about what we haven’t done.

As Lutherans we are continually reminded that we are saved by grace through faith! Christ’s death on the cross, and His resurrection from the grave, has freed us from our sin, so we don’t need to worry about our own salvation, freeing us to serve others. Along with this understanding of faith, we are also aware that our faith is demonstrated by how we live it out in our daily lives. We are called to do good deeds: to help the poor, to feed the hungry, to take care of the sick, to provide water to the thirsty, to love our neighbor, and to look beyond our own desires and needs to the needs of those around us.

Jesus calls all believers to be alert and ready! We must not waste our opportunities. We must not squander away the time, or talents, that God has poured out upon us, or sit back waiting for Jesus to return. And although we may not always feel like we have a great deal of ability, or very many useful gifts for

that matter, we can still be faithful to the mission He has entrusted us with. In fact, perhaps it is time for us to embrace the power of the Spirit gifted to us in our baptisms, and to take to heart Paul's words in his letter to the Ephesians, our second lesson for today, "I pray that the God our Lord Jesus Christ, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that with the eyes of your heart enlightened you may know the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe!" In other words, through our knowing Christ we have been given access to an amazing source of power and spiritual vitality for living the Christian life.

It is often difficult for us to look beyond our own needs to the needs of others, and that is why we need to ask God to help us. That is why we need to allow the power of the Spirit to take hold of our lives, to help guide us in doing good works, and to open our eyes to the needs of others. One of my favorite songs is called "Give me your eyes" by Brando Heath. The chorus goes something like this..." Give me your eyes for just one second[Soft Break]Give me your eyes so I can see..Everything that I keep missing....Give me your love for humanity....

In our Gospel story, neither the sheep nor the goats saw Jesus in those who were in need. And yet, there is nothing to stop us from asking God to open our eyes, and to give us the courage and strength through his Spirit, to look beyond our own desires, so that we can assist others. I would like to share a brief illustration to help us understand that we can never fully know what might happen when we help a person in need.

One day, a poor boy named Howard Kelly was selling goods from door to door to pay his way through school. Eventually he became hungry and decided he would ask for a small bite to eat at the next house. He lost his nerve, however, when a lovely young woman opened the door. So, instead of asking for something to nibble on he asked her for a drink of water instead.

After hearing his request, the lady thought the poor boy looked hungry, so she brought him a large glass of milk. He drank it slowly, and then asked, “How much do I owe you?” “You don’t owe me anything,” she replied, “my Mother taught us never to accept payment for kindness.” He answered, “In that case, I thank you from the bottom of my heart.” As Howard Kelly left that house, he not only felt stronger physically, but his faith in God and humanity was stronger also. He had been ready to give up and quit.

Several years later that same young woman that had helped him became critically ill. The local doctors were baffled. They finally sent her to the big city, where they called in a specialists to study her rare disease. Dr. Howard Kelly was called in for the consultation. When he heard the name of the town she came from, a strange light filled his eyes. Immediately he rose and went down the hall of the hospital to her room.

Dressed in his doctor’s gown he went in to see her. He recognized her at once, he went back to his office, and was determined to do his best to save her life. From that day he gave special attention to her case and after a long struggle the battle was won. Dr. Kelly requested the business office send him the final bill for his approval. He looked at it, scribbled some notes on it, and the bill was delivered to her room. The woman feared to look at it, for she was sure it would take the rest of her life to pay for it all. Finally, she mustered the courage to open it and discovered a little written message on the side of the bill. She read these words.....“Paid in full with one glass of milk.” — Signed — Dr. Howard Kelly.

The vision Jesus provides us with in our Gospel story for today is clear. The life of a Christian is a life given in love to the least of these. But that’s good works, isn’t it? Won’t such good works for our neighbor destroy the “faith alone” foundation of our faith? The answer to that question is “no!” We can love the least and little ones in our midst, as much as we can possibly imagine, and not be guilty

of possessing a belief in works-righteousness. After all, the sheep in Jesus' story haven't kept score, and are surprised by what they had actually done, because they only did what came naturally to them.

If we view life as a choose your own adventure book and we choose to truly live out our faith, then we will love God and our neighbor, and acts of kindness will happen without us having to really think about them. We must not forget that our loving lord Jesus, Our Father, is not on vacation and will one day return. So let us be good sheep, good children and obey his command to love one another as he has loved us. Thanks be to God...Amen!