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“Gathered and Separated”
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Old Stone Presbyterian Church ~ Lewisburg, West Virginia
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Matthew 25:31-46

31 "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. 32 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, 33 and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

34 Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 35 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, 36 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.'

37 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? 38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?'

40 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.' 41 Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; 42 for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43 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.'

44 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?' 45 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.'

46 And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

Peter Lovenheim¹ has lived most of his life in the same suburban neighborhood of Rochester, NY. There were a few years when he lived away, but when he found himself married and a father, they decided they should move back. Not only did they move back to Peter's home town, they moved back to the very same house in which Peter had grown up.

To Peter, it almost seemed as though he had never moved away. The same street. The same familiar sights. The same woman who walked through his neighborhood almost every day when he was a child, was still there, forty years later, walking.

Nobody knew her name, they just called her "the walker."

Not long after Peter had moved back, something awful happened in his neighborhood. Just up the street. He wrote, "What struck me about this event — besides the tragedy — was that a family who had lived on my street for seven years had, in essence, vanished overnight. Yet the effect on my neighborhood seemed slight. No one, including me, knew the family well. In fact, as far as I could tell, no one seemed to know anyone beyond a casual, superficial level."

Nobody knew that their world was crumbling. Nobody knew. And, not knowing, nobody had done anything to help.

¹ <http://www.christiancentury.org/reviews/2011-07/suburban-search-meaning?print>

retrieved August 17, 2011.

<http://articles.latimes.com/print/2011/apr/08/opinion/la-oe-lovenheim-neighborhoods-20110408>

retrieved April 20, 2011.

Peter, who had specifically chosen to move back to this neighborhood, wasn't satisfied to let this go and for things to continue as they had been. How could he get to know his neighbors?

He started by introducing himself to the woman who walked. Her name was Grace Field. She had studied at Julliard and was an accomplished pianist and harpist. And in forty years of walking, she told him, only a handful of people had stopped and talked with her.

That was a start, but it wasn't enough. Peter had another plan to get to know his neighbors. He invited himself to sleep over. To sleep over at their houses, to really get to know them.

Anyone can be polite through a supper or a lunch, but when you spend the night you really get to know someone. Who they are. How they live. You have the opportunity for real conversation, and possible real relationship. And so he invited himself to sleepover. About ½ of his neighbors accepted his invitation.

Peter tells about his experiences in his book: *In the Neighborhood: The Search for Community One Sleepover At A Time*.²

Peter reports that in the process he found out lots about his neighbors. There were the little things, like who loved cats. Who would have a cocktail each day at three. And who had a house full of oriental rugs. But he also found out the big things, like whose marriage was struggling and which single mom was fighting breast cancer, who needed help, but hadn't known who or how to ask. After finding out, the neighbors coordinated transportation for her to chemo. Meals. Watching her kids in the afternoons. Once they knew, of course they helped. Who wouldn't?

Once they knew. Once they were in relationship with each other, it changed everything.

Relationships. Communication. How do we know each other, and how much work do we put in it?

Do we know our neighbors? In the pew, in our neighborhood, across town, around the world?

It's one of the questions Jesus is asking in the passage from Matthew we heard this morning.

Do we know our neighbors?

That may not have been the first thing that popped in your mind when you heard it this morning. It certainly isn't for me. Each time I hear this text the words rain down on me with a mixture of guilt and conviction, reminding me that there is more to do.

That **is** part of this text's message³:

We need to be people who live their faith, sharing what we have with those who are in need. We need to be people who are Sharing. Feeding. Housing. Comforting.

But to jump to these actions when we hear this text is to get ahead of ourselves, for that's not where Jesus starts. Jesus doesn't start with the doing, Jesus starts with the seeing.

I'm sure you noticed it... the sheep and the goats, they both have the same question:

"When did we see you, God? When did we?"

² http://www.amazon.com/Neighborhood-Search-Community-American-Sleepover/dp/B0040RMEQW/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1321824560&sr=8-1

³ Leander E. Keck, New Testament Editor, *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, Vol. VIII, "Matthew" by M. Eugene Boring, [Nashville: Abingdon Press] 1995, pgs. 454-459.

When did we have the opportunity to serve? To help? To care for you?

For the goats, it is the recognition that if they had known the King was there in the middle of those in need, they would have helped.

For the sheep, it is the recognition that they helped whether their King was present or not.

If we want to do the things God is calling us to do, expecting us to do, we start by seeing. By knowing. Until you know, until you get to know, you cannot truly help.

And we don't start by looking for Jesus, for neither the sheep nor the goats saw Jesus. We start by seeing the least of these.

These least of these. How do we see them, how do we know them, how do we welcome the "other" in our midst. Once the neighbors knew there was a need, they reached out to help. Once they knew.

Do you know your neighbor? In the pew, in our neighborhood, across town, around the world?

Professor of New Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary, Stanley Saunders, writing about this text from Matthew, says⁴:

"Christian practice is fundamentally about making space for others, especially the most vulnerable, just as God has come to make space for us. A Disciple's relationship with Jesus is integrally related to his or her relationship with real people, especially with the "least ones." Some might describe these relationships in terms of "social justice," other in terms of "evangelization." Both tend to turn people into abstractions, whereas Jesus calls us into the dangers, risks, opportunities, and possibilities of real relationships. There are no extrinsic rewards to be gained.... by means of these relationships—only the possibly of discovering, together with the least one, the presence and power of God.... Such relationships are neither practical nor an efficient use of time. These relationships are, nonetheless, the heart and soul of God's mission in the world."

No abstractions. Relationships. If we want to help. If we want to see Jesus, we must start by getting to know the And that means the work of getting to know someone. Their hurts. Their needs. Their joys. Something for which there are no shortcuts. There is no app for forming relationship.

Which does not mean that we cannot use technology in this process.... One of the most powerful communities I know is the RevGalBlogPals⁵, a web community of women preachers who were formed one week in August out of concern for a Presbyterian colleague in the path of Hurricane Katrina. They gathered to bring her prayer and support, and they continue to do the same through the internet, while each of them is in their own place around the world.

It doesn't matter where you are or what avenue you are traveling, there are no shortcuts to building faithful relationships.

Only time invested, listening, sharing.

A few years ago there was an article in my local paper⁶ about a group that is living out this kind of practice as an outreach to the chronically homeless. Housing for New Hope.

⁴ Stanley Saunders, *Preaching the Gospel of Matthew: Proclaiming God's Presence*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2010. pgs 260-261.

⁵ http://revgalblogpals.blogspot.com/2005_08_01_archive.html
Retrieved November 19, 2011.

⁶ Jay Price, "Teams Try Bringing Homeless In From the Cold," *The News & Observer*, November 17, 2011.
<http://www.newsobserver.com/2011/11/17/1649994/come-in-from-the-cold-team-says.html#storylink=misearch>

"We find people, meet people and build some form of relationship," One of their Outreach Team Leaders said. "Anybody can get out and preach from a corner and tell you what you ought to be doing. We don't do that. We just let them know help is available and when you're ready we can help link you with it. We have empathy that's real, and people can relate to us...."

Many of the individuals Housing for New Hope is trying to help are wary. Reluctant. Some are defiant and it can take years to establish the kind of trust that will allow them to believe it when someone from Housing for New Hope tells them that it can be better. That there are those who will help them come in from the cold. It can take years to build this kind of relationship. But it happens, in large part because they don't lead with the help, they lead with the relationship.

Is that level of investment worth it? Kelly, the man giving the interview, would say it is. He used to live on the streets, in the woods, until someone took the time to get to know him, and knowing him, was there when he was vulnerable, and open to help.

It can take years. And it's not easy. No relationship is easy. Relationships require that we give of ourselves, that we open ourselves. And that means joy and hope, but it also means disappointment.

And the week of Thanksgiving, when the coupons offer savings on cranberry sauce, bread crumbs, and headache relief, Tylenol, advil, excedrin,⁷

We aren't perfect... we are in relationship.

Do you know your neighbor? In the pew, in our neighborhood, across town, around the world?

So why should we do it? Because relationships are the very thing to which Jesus calls us. And they are the way God changes us.

No shortcut, no easy answers, just the willingness to be open, to take the step, to reach out your hand, knowing that we are all broken. We are all in need of the love and grace of God.

On this Christ the King Sunday, we are given a powerful image of what it means for Jesus to be King, for he tells us he is the one who is naked. He is the one who is sick, suffering, grieving, lost. Jesus the King, Jesus our shepherd, the good shepherd who knows us and takes us to the green pastures, the cool waters, and leads us through the dark and dangerous places. God, who invites us to sing and offer thanksgiving. God, whose smile when we begin our journey up the driveway to the door greets us with open arms and a huge smile.

Seeing us, and then hoping to get to know us, teaching us how to know our brothers and sisters. Sleepover. Supper. Coffee. Chat. On the street and in our homes.

When was it Lord? When was it? When did we see you? Let it be today. Let it be today.

Retrieved November 18, 2011.
<http://housingfornewhope.org/>

⁷ A former church member in Chapel Hill pointed this out on a Facebook post, and I've not forgotten it.