

### **Endure in Love**

Our gospel reading today is a parable that comes at the end of two chapters, where Jesus addresses the “end times”. Jumping in where we did, is like catching the tail end of a conversation—without knowing what’s been said, it’s hard to understand the context. So we have to backup—all the way to the beginning of Matthew 21.

Matthew 21 starts with the story of Jesus Triumphant entry into Jerusalem—marking the beginning of Jesus last week with his disciples. The rest of Matthew 21-23 tells stories of Jesus and the disciples visiting the temple—where Jesus taught and engaged conversations with the Scribes and Pharisees.

At the beginning of Matthew 24, as Jesus and the disciples are leaving the temple, the disciples start to point out the different buildings that made up the temple—we don’t know what was said, but it’s easy to imagine it was something along the lines of, “Rabbi, aren’t these buildings incredible?! They’re huge!”

But instead of agreeing, Jesus responds “You see all these, do you not? Truly I tell you, not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”

And with that, Jesus launches into a two chapter “mini apocalypse”, or “end of times” teaching that includes warnings and parables, all of which conclude with our story for today.

Now these two chapters of apocalypse and end times stories, raise a whole host of questions and speculations—and if you’ve ever read “the left behind series” or have ventured to read other apocalyptic fiction—then you know that sometimes, these chapters cause people to be afraid and wonder, “what’s Jesus talking about?” “Can we really see the end coming?” “Is God really going to separate the sheep and the goats? If so, please tell me I’m a sheep!”

But nestled within all of these warnings and parables, Jesus is offering his disciples instructions—because he knows that the cross is on the horizon and soon he will be gone—so they need to know what to do in his absence—so these stories offer an invitation to his disciples—to be about doing the work God has given them to do as they watch and wait for Jesus to come again.

We see the first glimpse of this invitation in Matthew 24 verse 10-13 when Jesus is talking about persecution of his followers—he says “Then, many will fall away, and they will betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray.

And because of the increase of lawlessness, the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.”

In the midst of this grim picture—of betrayal and hatred, false prophets, the splintering of a community and the loss of love because of lawlessness...there’s a promise, that the one who endures to the end will be saved...

There are some who argue that this section is all about faith—enduring in faith until the very end no matter how challenging it becomes—will be saved.

But what if Jesus is talking about enduring in love?

The one who endures in extending love to others, even in the face of betrayal. The one who experiences the hate of others but is willing to extend kindness. The one who sees lawlessness around them but refuses to give in and treats others with dignity and respect—this one will be saved.

Because if it is the one who endures in love who will be saved, than that has something to tell us about our text for today.

As we read earlier, Jesus describes the Son of Man separating, the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the Son of Man turns to the sheep with surprising news: when they fed, clothed, welcomed and visited those in need, they were actually doing those things to God. Because The God of the universe, with infinite power and authority—can be located, not in some vast eternal space, but in the very lives of those in need.

The goats too were shocked to learn that when they had failed to feed, clothe, welcome and visit those in need, they had neglected to care for God.

But the other twist in the text is that—the sheep were surprised...

It turns out the sheep hadn’t gone looking for ways to earn their way into heaven...but when faced with the needs of others, they responded—not out of fear or guilt, or with “musts” or “should’s”—but out of genuine love, they fed the hungry, gave water to the thirsty, clothed the naked, welcomed the stranger, visited those in prison and took care of the sick and in turn discovered God in their midst.

In 2019, our denomination, the PC(USA), launched the Matthew 25 initiative. Using this text as their guide, our denomination is inviting congregations and Presbyteries to commit to one or more of three foci:

- Building Congregational Vitality
- Dismantling Structural Racism
- And Eradicating Systemic Poverty.

Rev. Dr. Diane Moffett who is the Executive Director and President of the PC(USA) Mission Agency, has outlined the purpose of this initiative saying that Matthew 25 invites congregations to actively engage in the world, putting feet to faith, hands to hope and legs to love.

In December our Mission Committee discussed the possibility of Ladue Chapel becoming a Matthew 25 congregation—because when we look at who we are as a church, this body has had a strong commitment to partnering and working with local organizations to address issues of housing, food insecurity, access to education and helping people re-enter community after prison.

In many ways becoming a Matthew 25 congregation is simply recognizing the incredible generosity and the enduring love this congregation has been committed too for decades. At the same time—joining this initiative is also saying yes to exploring new ways of living out our discipleship and enduring in love.

It was the mission committees unanimous vote that sent their recommendation to session and during the December session meeting, the motion was passed.

Ladue Chapel is now a Matthew 25 congregation.

Our mission committee has formed a “Matthew 25” task group, and over the next few weeks and months they will be looking at new ways for us to live out this initiative as we seek to build congregational vitality, dismantle structural racism and eradicate systemic poverty.

This is a bold vision put forth by our denomination—and it invites us to dream in new ways about what it means to follow Christ and endure in love.

A story was written, just last month, on NPR—about how local UCC churches and the Deaconess Foundation had come together in order to help alleviate medical debt for families living under the national poverty level.

The churches had raised a portion which was then matched by the Deaconess foundation and together there funds totaled a little over \$100,000. With the help of a New York non-profit called RIP Medical Debt, they were able to purchase and expunge, \$12,967, 350 worth of medical debt. Pennies on the dollar...

Over 11,000 families right here in St. Louis were assisted in this effort.

When asked why they chose to take this action, Rev. Rebecca Turner said “As Christian people who walk in the steps of Jesus, it is our joy and duty to care for our neighbor.”

But their efforts aren't stopping their—Rev. Starsky Wilson goes on to say, “We recognize access to healthcare is a persistent challenge for the one in five children living in poverty in the St. Louis region. Medical debt is a drag on family stability and economic mobility for these families.”

Along with paying off medical debts that families cannot afford, the UCC is now working to expand Medicaid in MO, so more families have access to the healthcare they need and will not face falling into medical debt again.

Jesus calls us, as disciples, to do the work God has given us to do as we watch and wait for Christ to come again...our work is not to be afraid but with compassion and empathy we are called to follow Christ and endure in love,

Feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty  
Welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked,  
Caring for the sick and visiting those in prison...

This is our call...And as a church we have the opportunity to look with new eyes out into our community and ask, what does it look like for us to endure in love—because when we do God's Kingdom breaks through more and more into the world around us and we encounter Christ in our very midst.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen

Rev. Mel Smith  
Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church (USA), St. Louis, MO  
February 16, 2020