

1 Timothy 6:11-16 Matthew 25:31-46 November 22, 2020
Christ the King Sunday

A MATTHEW 25 CHURCH

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

“Duplin Christian Outreach Ministries endeavors to serve Duplin County citizens who are experiencing a crisis. We provide crisis assistance as resources are available and upon verification of need. DCOM helps people when they are experiencing a crisis. A crisis is defined as an unexpected situation or event that occurs beyond the control of the individual/family/household.”

That is the description of our local crisis center on the website www.duplinchristian.com. The website also lists core values of the ministry, including RESPECT, which is defined as “Treat people as they should be treated.” The interdenominational ministry, now in its sixteenth year of service, is unashamedly Christian. When the steering team selected the name, we intentionally included the word “Christian,” even though we knew that might disqualify us from receiving some grants. The steering team members agreed “Christian” should be in the name, because Jesus Christ and his commands are the motivation for the ministry. People who come to DCOM know they are visiting a Christian ministry.

On the other hand, when someone walks through the door at 514 S. Norwood Street, we have no idea if the person is a Christian – and it doesn’t matter. What matters is if the person is in need due to a crisis. At most board of directors’ meetings, we pray that all who work and volunteer at DCOM will welcome and treat every person who walks through the door as if he or she were Jesus Christ himself.

If that description of DCOM’s ministry sounds like the parable of the sheep and the goats, well, that’s not a coincidence. Many Christian ministries are inspired and guided by the words of the king in this parable: “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.” (Matthew 25:35-36)

Four years ago and, again, two years ago, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) began what is called The Matthew 25 Initiative. In answer to the question “What is a Matthew 25 church?” the GA noted that “Matthew 25:31-46 calls all of us to actively engage in the world around us, so our faith comes alive and we wake up to new possibilities . . . to act boldly and compassionately to serve people who are hungry, oppressed, imprisoned or poor. . . We recognize Christ’s urgent call to be a church of action, where God’s love, justice and mercy shine forth and are contagious. And we rejoice how our re-energized faith can unite all Presbyterians for a common and holy purpose: our common identity to do mission.”¹

Since March, and especially in the past few months, more people have come to our Helping Hands Food Pantry via Duplin Christian Outreach Ministries. Baptists on Mission have been distributing food boxes weekly at various points throughout Duplin County. Volunteers at the Poston Baptist Church site in Tin City hand out boxes of food to 125 – 150 families per week. Two years ago, in the aftermath of Hurricane Florence, people were in desperate need of help with food, shelter, clothing, water, and health care. What quickly became evident is that, while Florence might have caused some of those crisis situations, on the other hand, Florence pulled back a curtain on problems and needs all around us: economic disparity, lack of affordable housing, and food deserts, just to name a few.

Thank God we have helping ministries such as DCOM, Baptists on Mission, the Charity Rebuild Center, Blessings in Store, and many others. Thank God people are generous with their financial contributions and gifts in kind and with their volunteer hours. The ministries wouldn't exist otherwise.

But's here a nagging question underlying all of these ministries: Why do we have to have them in the first place? And the answer isn't because people have needs. The question is meant to get at the reasons *why* people have so many needs. While necessary and much appreciated, it's fairly easy to write a donation check or fill a bag with groceries or donate some items to the thrift store. The challenge comes in trying to address the underlying causes of the pressing needs in our community.

In an article about the Matthew 25 Initiative called "What does being a Matthew 25 church mean?" the author writes, "Being a Matthew 25 Church means you are actively engaged in one or more of the following ministries:

- Building congregational vitality by challenging people and congregations to deepen their faith and get actively and joyfully engaged with their community and the world.
- Dismantling structural racism by advocating and acting to break down the systems, practices and thinking that underlie discrimination, bias, prejudice and oppression of people of color.
- Eradicating systemic poverty by working to change laws, policies, plans and structures in our society that perpetuate economic exploitation of people who are poor.²

There are two interesting twists in this parable about the sheep and the goats. First, did you notice that the ones on the right and the ones on the left asked the very same question of the king, except for their actions at the end? "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?" The difference in their questions, however, is striking. The ones who *did* do these things had no idea they were serving the king when they fed, watered, clothed, tended, and visited those in need. In other words, they weren't doing it for the glory or to earn brownie points. They did it because they saw the need. However, the ones who *didn't* do these things seem to imply that if they had only known it was the king, then they certainly would have fed, watered, clothed, tended, and visited those in need. But that's sort of the point of the parable, isn't it?

And that brings us to the second interesting twist. On this Christ the King Sunday, we will sing “O Worship the King, All Glorious Above.” We will also affirm our faith in our Lord and Savior who “though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.” (Philippians 2:6-8)

That’s right – it’s as if the Son of Man has come down from his throne of glory and taken his place in line at the soup kitchen or under the bridge or in the homeless shelter or walked through the door at Duplin Christian Outreach Ministries – “As you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me.” Think about it – the one who told this parable about life in the kingdom as God’s people is the same one who gave up everything for our sake and went to the cross to serve us in our time of need.

Perhaps it’s dangerous to hold up Mother Teresa as an example; after all, she is a saint! But she’s a saint and an example because of what she did and how she lived her life faith in obedience to her calling from God. Here are some of her answers when asked why she did what she did among the poor in Calcutta:

“I see Jesus in every human being. I say to myself, this is hungry Jesus, I must feed him. This is sick Jesus. This one has leprosy or gangrene; I must wash him and tend to him. I serve because I love Jesus.”

“Every one of them is Jesus in disguise.”

She said that she saw the face of Jesus in the face of each sick and dying person she helped. She asked the whole world to look for Jesus’ face there, too.

As one writer has put it, “God continues to come where we least expect God to be: in the plight of the homeless, on the side of the poor, in the face of the needy, and in the company of the imprisoned.”³ If we can truly see the face of Jesus in **every** face, then we can continue to be engaged in helping ministries that are so needed. If we open our eyes and our hearts to see Jesus in disguise, then we can do the hard and necessary work to be a Matthew 25 Church.

Let us pray: Lord, we pray for your Kingdom to come here now, bringing a kingdom of justice, righteousness, hope, love, peace, mercy and grace for all. Lord, we ask that you rule in our hearts, lead us in this world, and govern over your kingdom. Amen.

NOTES

- ¹ “Matthew 25 in the (PCUSA): A bold vision and invitation,” at www.presbyterianmission.org.
- ² Ilene Black, “What does being a Matthew 25 Church mean?” July 6, 2020 at www.presnb.com.
- ³ David Lose, “Christ the King A: The Unexpected God,” at www.davidlose.net.