



Sunday, October 15, 2023

“Beyond Charity”

Charlie Berthoud | Luke 10:25-37, Amos 5:21-24

When I was in college, a long time ago, I got involved with a couple of Christian fellowship groups. We met for Bible study, prayer, music, and such. Those groups were really vital to my growth as a Christian, however the theology was very focused on Jesus as our personal savior and on personal morality, things like drinking and sex .

I also started asking questions about the world, and the reality of human suffering. In my English 101 class, we had to write a research paper. I wrote on food waste and hunger.

I also got involved with peace and justice groups, with focus on Apartheid in South Africa and the contra war in Nicaragua.

So, one night I'd go to a Bible study and the next night I'd go hear a speaker about poverty and dictatorship in Central America. And then I started to wonder: why aren't we talking about poverty and hunger and war and injustice in our Bible studies?

The more I read the Bible, the more I saw Jesus feeding hungry people, Jesus caring for the outcasts and the forgotten, Jesus speaking out against the religious and political authorities.

I was inspired by biblical calling for peace, with scripture about swords to be turned into plowshares and visions of God's shalom.

I read the biblical prophets denouncing greed and indifference, calling for fair wages and justice.

Christian faith isn't just about me getting a one-way ticket to heaven. Jesus showed concern over and over about life in this world, right here and now.

I began to realize that while God cares about personal morality, God also cares, probably much more so, about human suffering in the world.

Around that time, I learned of the quote by theologian Karl Barth, who said:

“We must hold the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.”

In today’s world that might mean having your news app and your Bible app open at the same time, but you know what I mean.

As Christians we are called to love our neighbors, so this means we need to know about whatever situations our neighbors are in. So reading or scrolling the New York Times or the Wall Street Journal is really an act of faith.



And this idea of connecting our faith with the world is actually part of the constitution of the Presbyterian Church USA; it’s part of our job description as Christians.

Our *Book of Order* has a section called the Ministry of Members, with twelve items in a list, about our common calling.

The Ministry of Members:

- proclaiming the good news in word and deed
- taking part in the common life and worship of a congregation
- lifting one another up in prayer, mutual concern, and active support
- studying Scripture and the issues of Christian faith and life
- supporting the ministry of the church through the giving of money, time, and talents
- demonstrating a new quality of life within and through the church
- responding to God’s activity in the world through service to others



The Ministry of Members (continued)

- living responsibly in the personal, family, vocational, political, cultural, and social relationships of life,
- working in the world for peace, justice, freedom, and human fulfillment
- caring for God’s creation
- participating in the governing responsibilities of the church
- reviewing and evaluating regularly the integrity of one’s membership and considering ways in which one’s participation in the worship and service of the church may be increased and made more meaningful.



This month, we’re doing a four-week series, focused on what it means to be a Christian, and how the 12 things on this list are building blocks for us.

The idea is that we need to be intentional in building our faith, building our Christian life, and this list helps us.

Please take note, as I said last week, no one can do all 12 of these, but everyone can focus on a few of them.

Last week we focused on supporting the church through sharing time, talent, and treasure.

Next week we focus on caregiving and taking care of each other. In two weeks, we conclude on Reformation Sunday, thinking about ways we can all continually be reformed and renewed.

Today, we focus on “studying Scripture and the issues of faith and life.”

As Christians we are called to study scripture and issues of faith and life. Bible in one hand, newspaper in the other.

There are several other building blocks that flow out of that one:

- “responding to God’s activity in the world through service to others”
- “living responsibly in the personal, family, vocational, political, cultural, and social relationships of life”
- “working in the world for peace, justice, freedom, and human fulfillment.”

If you want to spend some time reflecting on these building blocks pick up a copy of the prayer list in the back of the sanctuary or look in our Worship HQ online.

The basic idea is that a central responsibility we have as Christians, as followers of Jesus, is to engage with the issues of the world, and in simple language try to make this world a better place.

We need to integrate our Bible study with what is happening in the world, in our neighborhoods, in our history and in our culture.

Remember Jesus said taught us to pray: “Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth, as in heaven.” God’s will is meant to happen here and now.

We are called to “study Scripture and the issues of faith and life.”

Two weeks ago, Rev. Dr. William Yoo helped us understand the connection between our faith and conditions in the world, with his preaching and teaching about seeking God’s justice in the context of slavery.

Dr Yoo’s extensive research shows how most white Presbyterians in the early 19th century were at best indifferent to the plight of enslaved persons. Many pastors and seminary professors openly advocated for slavery.

In the ongoing struggle for justice and against racism, Dr Yoo reminded us that Martin Luther King was inspired by the prophet Amos, who denounced injustice eight centuries before Jesus. The words of Amos seem to be directed at people who were involved in worship but uncaring toward unjust conditions around them.

It's like they were reading their Bibles but not reading their newspapers. Or if they were reading the newspapers, they weren't moved to do anything about the unjust conditions of the world, content to go to their self-serving and self-justifying worship services.

Because of their indifference to the suffering around them, Amos thunders to the religious people, with the voice of God:

I hate, I despise your festivals,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.

²² Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them,
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals
I will not look upon.

²³ Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.

²⁴ But let justice roll down like water
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

If you missed Dr Yoo's sermon or class, they are available on our website. And we have a few copies of his book remaining.

Let's think about our gospel reading today. The parable of the Good Samaritan is one of the best-loved stories in scripture. A traveler is beaten up and lies by the road. Two religious leaders ignore him. A Samaritan, a foreigner, stops and helps him, taking the wounded person to an inn, spending their own money.

Jesus tells this story after teaching about loving God and loving neighbor and being asked "who is my neighbor?" Jesus never directly answered the initial question, and he concludes by changing the question, saying "who acted like a neighbor?" Obviously, the Samaritan did, so Jesus says "go and do likewise."

Remember that Jesus told parables to get us thinking, to "tease the mind into active thought" as one biblical scholar puts it. So, let's think about this story some more.

What if the next day, another person was beaten up and left the roadside? Maybe the Samaritan, or someone else would help. What if it happened the following day, and again and again?

At what point would the good Samaritans (and hopefully the religious leaders) walk to the nearest town and start asking questions?

- Do we need better lighting on this road?
- Are there no jobs in the community?
- Are the people who are working getting a fair wage?
- Do we need a stronger police presence?
- Are the police or the judicial system corrupt?
- Do we need more programs and activities for young people?

Charity is great. Bandaging the wounds of the person beaten up on the road is a good thing. But at some point, someone needs to move beyond charity and try to get to the root of the problem.

Earnestly seeking justice and righteousness and earnestly working for God's Kingdom, God's Realm, means that we have to move beyond band aids and simple charity and ask deeper questions about systems and structures.

Asking questions and seeking wisdom on complicated subjects is hard work; sometimes it's dangerous work.

Brazilian bishop Dom Helder Camara experienced this, when in the midst of the cold war and a brutal right-wing dictatorship he said: "When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist."

Jesus asked questions, lots of questions. Something like 130 of them in the gospels. Questions like:

- Who acted like a neighbor?
- Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye and not the plank in your own?
- What good is it to gain the world and forfeit your soul?
- Why do you call me Lord and not do what I say?
- Do you love me?

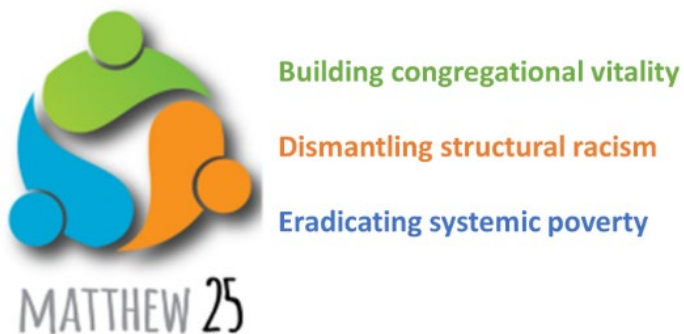
If we are going to be serious about our Christian faith in the world today, we need to be question-askers.

We are a Matthew 25 congregation. This is an initiative of the Presbyterian Church USA, inspired by the words of Jesus in the 25th chapter of Matthew's gospel, the parable of the sheep and the goats, where Jesus said:

“I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was in prison and you visited me.”

These words of Jesus make me think that he wants us to see the people around us, to recognize our common humanity, to find new and deeper ways of really loving one another and caring for one another.

The Matthew 25 initiative has three goals:



Our Session approved this initiative. We are a Matthew 25 congregation. You can see the logo on the bulletin. So, and we're working on all three of the goals, which means we have to ask a lot of hard questions and wrestle with complicated issues.

Thanks to the efforts of several people, we've learned a lot and grown a lot in thinking about racism and race relations.

Similarly, we've learned a lot and grown a lot in terms of our Guatemala partnership. Not just charity, but partnership. We are launching a Guatemala Education Team to help us ask more questions and get closer to root causes of poverty and injustice in Guatemala.

I'm glad we're doing these things, but it feels like we're really just beginning to ask the hard questions, to move beyond charity into justice and transformation.

I don't know the answers. I'm not even sure I know all the questions to ask but we need to keep moving. We have work to do.

We need to move beyond charity toward really working for justice and righteousness, toward the vision of God's Kingdom.

One final thought.

I get a hard copy of the New York Times every Sunday. I like to read and learn about the world on Sunday afternoons. But it's exhausting to begin reading about the threats to democracy in our country, the war in Ukraine, the chaos and deep-rooted hatred in the Middle East, the challenges of education, and so on. Sometimes, I skip the news sections and go right to the Ken Ken puzzles and the Book Review, looking for a new novel. When I get overwhelmed like this, I remember my friend Maria.

Maria has been very active in her church for decades, and she is passionate about peace and justice in Central America. Occasionally as sometimes happens in church, people say to her that we should take care of people in the neighborhood first, that "charity begins at home."

Maria has heard this many times, and her standard response is something like this: "Yes there are many problems in the world, and we can't fix them all. But everyone can do something. I choose to focus my energy on Central America. How about you, where are you focusing yours?"

What one area or problem or challenge can you focus your energy on?

Nobody can do everything, but everyone can do something.

So as we read and listen to the news this week, let's think about Jesus, speaking to us today saying things like:

- I was hungry and you gave me something to eat
- I was in prison and you visited me
- I was trapped in poverty and you asked hard questions and helped find a way out, for me and many others
- I faced structural racism and you helped dismantle those structures, bringing us closer to liberty and justice for all

Friends God loves us, and God loves the world. God calls us to love our neighbors.

Let us not grow weary in doing what is right.

We are blessed to be a blessing.

To those of us who have been given much, much is expected.

May God give us the strength to not be overcome by evil but to overcome evil with good and, as Jesus calls us, to seek first the kingdom of God. Amen.