

## **“Can Do!” (Matthew 25:31-46) Christ the King Sunday, November 23, 2008**

Over the years, I have preached at least 30 stewardship sermons – even more, if you count all the sermons on giving and service. Yet, this year presents a special challenge. With our economy in such turmoil, with stocks and retirement accounts spiraling downward, people naturally take a second look at what they spend on this and that – including what they give for the work of the church.

It's a situation I have not faced before – at least, not to such an extent. However, I've known people who have faced such a situation and worse during the great Depression. In thinking about what I should say today, I flashed back to one of these people – my old landlady, Catherine Blakely, and what she often told me about her childhood pastor, Maynard Force. At the end of the 20's, her congregation had built a great big new sanctuary, and with the booming economy, they figured they'd have no problem paying off the debt. But then the stock market crashed. Jobs were lost. Incomes plummeted. And no one could tell how much worse things would get. Yet the building debt still needed to be paid off. What were they to do? As you can imagine, members felt pretty overwhelmed. As for Pastor Force, he was no financial wizard, but he did have faith...and common sense...and a positive attitude. So here is basically what he told the congregation: *Just do what you can. If you can give a little bit, give that little bit with confidence in God's providence. If you can give a bit more, give that bit more with gratitude for God's goodness. Just do what you can, and trust God to bless it. Do what you can.* Well, the members took this advice to heart. Families asked themselves, “What can we do?” Catherine even remembered conversations about this around her family's dinner table. And to make a long story short, that congregation managed just fine. Not that it was easy. Paying off such debt is never easy. But people stepped up to the plate, and they paid off that debt, and they managed just fine – by focusing on: What can we do?

That's good advice for us today as we prayerfully consider our financial support for this church. What can we do? It never helps to focus on what we cannot do. That just drags us down. What we need is a positive focus. Or better still, a faithful focus. Because don't we put our faith in a God for whom all things are possible? And don't we believe that this is God's work that we are about? And don't we trust that God's grace will be sufficient for us, that His power will be made perfect in weakness; in fact, that He is able to do abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine? You bet we do! So we have every reason to accent the positive, every reason to expect God to bring us through. Not by Him waving a magic wand, mind you. Not with financial wizardry. But by Him blessing and supplementing our efforts when we ask with a positive faith: What can we do?

I believe that's also the point in today's Gospel: *the need for a positive faith that asks: What can we do?* Granted, Jesus did not have Stewardship Sunday in mind when first told this parable, but He very much had in mind the kind of attitude He wants from His followers. When faced with obvious needs, when

challenged by the work He has given us, what He wants is a positive response: What can we do? The more we study this parable, the more we see this.

For the moment, forget the setting. This isn't really about the Last Judgment, any more than the preceding two parables are about weddings or investment strategies. Matthew ends the teaching portion of his Gospel with three parables about what it means to be faithful. The one about the *Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids* reminds us to stay spiritually focused and alert. The *Parable of the Talents* reminds us to use whatever God has given us to His glory and profit. And now this parable reminds us how real, mature faith operates in everyday life.

Jesus makes this point by drawing a sharp contrast between “the righteous” and the, shall we say, not-so-righteous – that is, between mature Christians who walk the walk and imitation Christians who just talk the talk. But where does the difference show up? Not where we might expect. Ironically, it's the difference in what the two groups don't remember and why they don't remember it!

I'm not kidding! Let's start with the “**righteous.**” Jesus doesn't present them as super-saints or martyrs. What He praises is quite ordinary stuff: **“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.”** Now, these are not heroic feats. They're not even distinctly Christian. They're things most people can do. Even the part about visiting those in prison -- back then, that was no biggy, for prisons were much smaller than they are today and much less intimidating. Back then, prisons also had no cafeteria; it was assumed that family and friends would bring the prisoners food; otherwise, they just starved. So all the things mentioned are things most people can do, and Jesus praises the righteous for doing what they can. But when He does this, notice how the righteous react. They're puzzled, aren't they? They don't remember doing what Jesus mentions. In effect, they say, *“Come again, Lord? When did we do all these things?”* And there's a good reason why they don't remember. When you're a mature Christian and you see an obvious need, love kicks into action, and you respond by doing what you can. It's nothing special, nothing extraordinary. In fact, it's pretty automatic. And frankly, you don't tend to remember that sort of thing. You're just doing what you can.

But now, contrast that with the folks on the other end of the spectrum. These other folks live in the same world, so they should be able to see same needs around them; they should be just as able to respond. But they don't. And why is that? It could be they just don't want to see the needs around them. Maybe they're too focused on themselves – on what they want, what they desire. Or it could be they don't feel “called” to respond. *This is not my problem, so it's not my responsibility.* Or perhaps they've rationalized: *The need is too great! The problem is too overwhelming! I can't tackle it all myself, so why even try?* At any rate, when Jesus reminds them what they did not do, they don't remember not

doing it. And why would they? If they don't care about someone else's need, why would they remember ignoring it? If they don't feel any call to serve, why would they remember rejecting it? And if they've convinced themselves that they can't do anything, so they don't do anything, why would they remember not doing it? They wouldn't. They simply wouldn't, sad to say.

So you see what I mean. The difference between the two groups is in what they don't remember and why they don't remember it. The righteous don't remember doing good things because it flows so naturally from within. The not-so-righteous don't remember not doing good things – because deep-down they're so self-absorbed. In this contrast we see what mature faith looks like. You simply, automatically do what you can.

And notice, there is no scolding or guilt-tripping here. Jesus never says “you should,” “you ought to,” or “you have to” – which is often how this text is misapplied. *You should be working harder for the Lord. You ought to do more to help the poor. In fact, you have to do more if you expect to stand on the right side come the Day of Judgment!* Folks, that's just works-righteousness, and it misses the point – which is not what we should do, ought to do, have to do, but rather what we will do when our lives are filled with the Lord and his love. Real faith will show in our actions and attitude. Mature faith will show it even more and will respond even more automatically. Christians are not compelled to do good. We are propelled to do good – propelled by faith to do what we can.

Actually, we see this all the time, don't we? Here at Richland Lutheran, I know that if a family falls on hard times and I put out a request for help, you folks will always rise to the occasion. When Lutheran Community Services asked us to supply Thanksgiving Dinners for the needy, you came through with flying colors. Why, just yesterday, when word got out that a member's husband had died, first thing in the morning I got a phone call asking what could be done for the family, and within minutes plans were underway to bring over a meal. Now, none of this happened because we felt compelled to do it. Rather we were propelled to do it. Pretty automatically, in fact. Propelled by faith to do what we can.

And I trust that's what will happen this year with our financial stewardship, too – even given the current economy; in fact, especially given the current economy. As you know, I've never been one to pound away at what “you should” give, “ought to” give, or “have to” give. That doesn't make for cheerful giving! And I'm not going to do in this year, either. No, like every year, we just need to prayerfully consider what we can give to support the Lord's work, and then respond as faith propels us. The advice Pastor Force gave decades ago fits our time and place as well: *Just do what you can. If you can give a little bit, give that little bit with confidence in God's providence. If you can give a bit more, give that bit more with gratitude for God's goodness. Just do what you can, and trust God to bless it. Do what you can.* Amen.