

September 25, 2022 Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church

John 21:15-17, Matthew 25:31-45

"The Well Lived Life: Serving Others"

Douglas T. King

"I am so great!" I am so great! Everybody loves me! I am so great!" A screeching song sung over and over again by Bart Simpson from the cartoon The Simpsons. It is a flashback to when he was two years old and acting every bit the two year old. Singing his song, wearing a pot on his head and banging a frying pan with a spoon, Bart is clearly the center of the entire universe. Like all two year olds, Bart is developing a personal identity. And the road to the creation of that identity is strewn with selfish and self-focused behavior.

As the episode progresses, his mother, Marge, is pregnant with another child and gives birth to his little sister Lisa. This development creates all of the jealousy one might expect from a self-centered two year old. How dare his parents and everyone else not focus solely on Bart every second of the day. No end of terrible two acting-out hijinks ensues including Bart cutting off all of baby Lisa's hair and trying to give her away to the Flanders, who are their neighbors.

Bart finally becomes so exasperated that he decides to run away from home. As he is packing up his little suitcase, Lisa comes crawling into his room. He starts to shout at her, blaming her for everything when Lisa speaks her first word. She imploringly calls out "Bart." Her very first word is the name of her brother. Bart's tiny, still-developing heart melts as he realizes that his baby sister needs him. He learns the world is bigger than just himself. He lovingly picks up his sister and races to show off her speaking ability to their parents.

Today is the third in the sermon series, "Living a Well-Lived Life." The first two weeks we considered how recognizing who we are and praising our God lead to a well lived life. Today we will be considering the importance of serving others. And we have begun with this tale of a tempestuous, self-involved two year old.

I cannot speak definitively for the rest of you but I can say with great certainty that there is still a tempestuous two year old residing within this fifty-five year old body of mine. I am capable of believing I am the center of the

universe. I am capable of ignoring the needs of others because I am so obsessed with my own perceived needs. I am capable of tantrums in my head about how unfair life is to me. I have yet to stomp around wearing a pot on my head and banging a pan singing, "I am so great." But I do not rule out that possibility.

And, of course our capacity to be self-focused is not necessarily about how great we are. We can become absorbed by our own troubles, or fears, or failures. It is surprisingly easy to have our world reduced to only what is going on for us personally. And this is an extremely unhealthy place to be.

But if we lift up our field of vision for just a moment we are given the opportunity to be freed from the imprisonment of the reduced world of self concern. In the Jewish faith, one is invited to pray at the arrival of the dawn. One time there was "A Talmudic Discussion among a group of rabbis arguing over when there is enough sunlight at dawn to say the morning prayer, the shema. One rabbi says it's when there's enough light to distinguish a blue thread from a purple; the second says it's when you can distinguish a purple from a black. The third says that it's when you can discern the faces of your fellow women and men..." (Zeitlin, p.49)

This little tale has much truth to speak to us. We do indeed live in darkness until we recognize the faces of those around us. And this does not mean solely putting names to faces, like "Hey, there is Joe or Sally." It is recognizing those around us are beloved children of God created in the image of God.

Both of our scripture texts this morning speak to this truth. In our text from the gospel of John we hear Jesus' repeated instruction to Peter. Three times he asks Peter if he loves him. And three times, after Peter says yes, Jesus tells him the only way to demonstrate that love is by tending and feeding his sheep, in other words caring for God's children. This is basically the last sermon Jesus preaches before ascending to heaven. When he only has time to say one last word of instruction it is "Feed my sheep."

In our text from the gospel of Matthew we get this famous tale of the sheep and the goats. We are told that those who have been feeding the hungry; giving drink to the thirsty; welcoming the stranger; clothing the naked; caring for the sick; and visiting the imprisoned, have in fact been doing that for Jesus. These folks will inherit the kingdom. Likewise, those that have been ignoring the needs of the hungry, the thirsty,

the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned, have been ignoring God. These people are banished to eternal punishment.

We usually read this text as a future judgement of what could happen to us if we either care for those in need or choose not to do so. But there is a second way this text can speak to us. Instead of hearing it as solely proscriptive of what is to come, we can also listen to it as a descriptive of where we find ourselves in the here and now.

When we ignore the needs of those around us because we are so trapped within the reduced world of self-concern our world is ever so small. We become obsessed over the smallest of our personal concerns. In the end we are deeply unhappy because every little disappointment that stops our life from being perfect weighs us down. By ignoring those in need around us we are punished right now, in the midst of our living. On the other hand, if we choose to reach out in concern for those in need, our world expands beyond our own problems. Our compassionate engagement brings perspective to our own challenges. And most importantly, as we have been told in our reading from Matthew, we are brought face to face with Jesus Christ in our midst.

The reality is whenever we reach out in concern for others, no matter how much we may be a help to someone else we always gain far more than we ever give. There are a multitude of ways we grow in our faith and our understanding of who God is. We do so in worship; in prayer; by studying scripture, by a variety of spiritual disciplines. But I am convinced that there is nothing more life-changing to our relationship with, and understanding of God than when we serve God's children who are in need. Being brought face to face with Jesus Christ in the faces of others is the deepest and most transformative Christian Education in the world.

A life that does not include demonstrating our love for God's children will leave us forever in the shallow waters of self-involvement. And there are a vast variety of ways in which we can reach beyond ourselves to find the face of Jesus Christ in others. Our Stephen ministry program and our deacons provide care and compassion for those who need it. Our Mission Committee is ever seeking volunteers to participate in serving at places like Isaiah 58 and on our days of service when we help agencies across the city of Saint Louis. Just walk by Les Hill at coffee hour and his is likely to rope you into something.

We live a well lived life when we live as God created us to be. And we were created to serve others. When we do so we are brought closer to our God and closer to our true selves. The self-centered two year old Bart had his life transformed when he learned he was needed by his sister. Let's not find ourselves wearing pots on our heads and singing a song of praise about ourselves. Let us praise our God by serving God's children.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Zeitlin, Steve ed., *Because God Loves Stories*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1997.