



It's Not About Me — Even When It Is

TEXT
Matthew 25:31–46
Acts 2:1–13

May 20, 2018 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

We have been reflecting on the importance in the Christian journey of learning to want what God wants. So how do we learn to want what God wants?

Well, worship is important. We have said that. In worship, we rehearse over and over the story that reminds us we are not defined by our talent and accomplishments; we are defined by who we love.

Scripture is important. It is in scripture that we learn the story of what God wants for us and for all. So, we come here week after week to understand — and more importantly, to stand under these ancient words, finding our own name in God's story.

We have said that sometime it's going to require some courage from us. Because what God wants from us is love. And love is not just something we talk about; love is something that we do.

There is one more thing that this Pentecost story teaches us. It so clear, I am embarrassed that I have not seen it until now.

The Spirit of God came upon the disciples. When this happened, Luke says the disciples were all together in one place.

One minute there were tongues of fire, and the next minute the disciples were speaking in tongues. But the most important work of the Spirit might have happened in between. The Spirit pushed them out of their one place; the Spirit pushed them out of the room. The day began, and they were all in one place — their place. Before they knew what happened, they were in conversation with Parthians and Medes, Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia.

If I understand the text, this is more than logistics. It's more than just changing location. What the Spirit does is teach these disciples, these men of Galilee, these men who had spent their whole lives in a geography not much bigger than Johnson County. They recognized that they were tied by this Spirit to the world. They were suddenly connected to people from Phrygia and Pamphylia, Cretans and Arabs. They hadn't cared about them before. But now they understand: Jesus came for them too.

Don't let me romanticize this. These people from various parts of the world didn't know each other — and despite not knowing each other, they no doubt didn't like each other very

much. There is a long history of being suspicious of those who are not like me.

There were Mexicans and Guatemalans. There were Jews and Palestinians. There were Iranians and Americans and people from Korea, north and south. There were Chinese and Japanese. There were folks from Charleston and Gettysburg. You get it. It's not just a place; it's history. No wonder the disciples began all together in one place. It was their place.

But the Spirit pushed them out of their one place, and they saw the world as a human family. Jesus came for them too.

I think this is the point made in the parable of the sheep and goats. He says, *There are people out there who are not like you. Maybe it's culture. Maybe it's life circumstance. Many of them are in need.*

The key to the parable is verse 40: "When you have done it unto the least of these who are members of my family!" It's not just about serving them; it's about knowing who they are. They are the family of Christ.

He's talking to the church, and the church understood herself to be the children of God, the family of Christ. So if we are Christ's family, and they

are Christ's family, then we are family together.

Unless you have done it unto the least of these who are my family ... Realize this: It is not their salvation that is at stake. It's ours. Our salvation rests in seeing them as Christ's family.

That's why the first work of the Spirit was to get the disciples out of their one place. They needed to know the Parthians and Medes and Elamites, for Christ came for them too. Or to say it the way Jesus said it, we need to get out of our place and know the hungry and the naked, the sick and the prisoner.

Arlin Buyert, a member of the Village family, is a man of deep faith, a compassionate spirit and a profound hope. Each spring and fall, Arlin spends every Thursday night teaching a poetry class in prison. They read poetry, they write poetry, and Arlin teaches them about sonnets and cinquains.

I went and listened. The inmates wrote of missing family, of disappointing their mothers, of longing to see their children. They spoke of brutality and bone-penetrating loneliness. I had never been on that side of the razor wire before. Just one time had an impact.

But I want you to hear what Arlin says about what it has meant to him to teach poetry at Lansing Prison. [At this point there is a two-minute video of Arlin Buyert speaking of his ministry at Lansing.]

"To see them as God's family, I was not expecting that," he said. I know this man. He is a good theologian. He is not

saying that he didn't understand them to be God's children in an intellectual fashion. He knew they were God's children here [head]. No, he is telling us that something happens to us here [heart] when we come to experience someone different from ourselves as a child of God.

Here's my point today. To know what God wants, we need to get out of our one place, so that we can be surprised by the people Christ came for.

Next Sunday I will be right here, but two weeks from today I will be preaching in Kibwezi, Kenya. I will be preaching to people who in many ways are very different from us. We speak different languages. We eat different foods. I wonder if any of them will have read a newspaper. I don't think they have access to Netflix.

By Sunday, I am sure I will have some sunburn; they will not. But Jesus came for them, just as he did for us — which is why I will go there to preach. And it is the only reason they will take time to listen to a preacher from Kansas. It's not about mission. It's about salvation, my own salvation. It's about knowing who they are. Christ came for them. We are family.

Friday night Jan Kraybill sat at this organ bench and brought beauty. I needed some beauty on Friday. Jan is a member of Village Church. She and her husband Alan worship at Antioch, and she often plays for our services at Antioch. Jan and Elisa Bickers are the two finest organists in the city — and I

imagine the Midwest — and both of them play at Village. We are a blessed people.

As Jan played, I remembered the first time I heard music from this organ. There were only a handful of pipes installed. Elisa played a simple melody. I listened and I wept. I gave thanks to God because I needed some beauty that day. Because that day was like this Friday, and once again children went to school to learn French or geometry or music, and instead they ran from gunshots or fell victim to the same. We pay attention to these shootings when they happen in mass, but most of the life lost to gun violence happens one at a time. There must be a profound loneliness to the grief when the pain comes and it seems no one even notices.

Paige Curry, a student of Santa Fe High School, who will no doubt have nightmares for a long time, was asked, "Did you think, this can't be happening?"

She replied, "No. This is happening everywhere. I assumed it would happen here too." We are teaching our children to expect gun violence to be part of their education. Our elementary children are having nightmares because they need to go through active shooter training in school. I understand why they do the training, but it comes with consequences.

We can be better, but our leaders don't want to be better. They are captured by fundamentalist political ideologies and are choosing the status quo. It shows a lack of courage, and I honestly think it is shameful.

This is not a circumstance that should be decided by money and lobbyists. These are our kids. Christ came for them.

The lesson of Pentecost is that the human family is family.

They were all together in one place. And then the Spirit pushed them from their one place into the world, and they met Jews and Palestinians. They met Koreans and Syrians and Iranians. They met Americans — black and white, rich and poor, liberal and conservative. And they discovered Christ came for them because they are his family.

To know what God wants, we need to know folks different from ourselves. It could be our own salvation depends on it.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.