

Have you ever participated in a scavenger hunt? At the beginning, you’re given a list of things you have to accumulate. All kinds of things might be on the list. The first group back with all the items and information wins. But before you get the prize, someone has to check off each item to make sure you found everything you say you have.

Is that the way it’s going to be on the Day of Judgment? The passage from Matthew says the King will be seated on the throne of glory and will gather all the nations before him. Then, he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates sheep from goats.

What happens next? Is it a scavenger hunt check off list? "Let’s see... yes, you once gave food to a hungry person. Check. There was the time you gave a drink of water to the thirsty child. Check. Visited a jail? Check. Called on someone who was sick? Check."

Is Jesus suggesting that you can make it into heaven by checking the right boxes? We know this runs counter to the core teaching of the Gospel, so that can’t be it.

And, to be perfectly candid, I read this and realize that there is no way that I have been generous enough. I come away feeling guilt and shame that I have ignored people who have been crying out for help; for some reason I was too busy, too preoccupied. A lot of boxes unchecked.

What is Jesus getting at here? I’d like to suggest that the scenario Jesus describes strikes right at the heart of a basic human problem. It all comes down to this: what do you think about those people called “the least”? This is a crucial question, because, and I can’t stress this enough, Jesus identifies himself with the least.

You and I are being asked, have you seen Jesus in the face of the hungry, the stranger, the vulnerable, the sick, the prisoner? Our Lord could not be more straightforward. Jesus is teaching that He is mysteriously present to us in those who need our help. When we see Jesus in the faces of the disadvantaged we will want to respond with love and address that person’s need. It follows that when we don’t see Jesus in the face of others, when we refuse to see Him there, we will not want to reach out in love to that person, in fact, we could be quite harsh and judgmental.

We worship a God who is entangled in the suffering of humanity. In fact, we worship a God who chooses not to untangle all the knots and problems of our world from the safety of heaven, but invites you to be a partner with him, to join your love to his love, and reach out to the suffering people in your world. This includes, but is not limited to, reaching out to our sick friends, making a meal for a grieving family, welcoming the stranger here at church, engaging with people we know who are depressed and doubting God’s love, people who need words of reassurance and hope. It means being understanding and supportive of the members of our families, showing genuine love for our friends—and praying for our enemies. We are to see the face of Jesus in the faces of these people and tend to them in the same way Jesus has tended to us in our times of need.

But Jesus goes even further. Remember, he is talking about the least important. People whom others regard as insignificant. People who are easily forgotten. People who are out of sight so out

of mind. The love of Christ animates our thoughts and enables us to adopt His values: values that are upside down by the world's standards. Values in which the last, or least, are first.

Here is a story of which there are a number of variations. Conrad, the old cobbler, dreamed one night that Jesus would come to be his guest. He was up as the sun was rising and set about decorating his little shop with bright flowers and greenery. He set the table with milk and honey and bread and waited.

While he was waiting, a beggar walked down the street barefoot in the driving rain. Conrad called him in and gave him a pair of shoes. An elderly woman came bent from the weight of a heavy burden. He lifted the load off her back and shared his food with her. And finally, just before the day was about to fade away into darkness, a little child came. Her eyes were wet with tears. Conrad gave her a glass of milk and led her back to her mother. But the divine guest never came. Conrad was disappointed. The evening as he dozed in front of the fireplace he heard a soft voice say,

"Lift up your heart, for I have kept my word.

Three times I came to your friendly door;

Three times my shadow was on your floor.

I was the beggar with the bruised feet;

I was the woman you gave to eat;

I was the child on the homeless street!"

That story beautifully echoes Jesus' statement, "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."

You see, Jesus doesn't need our good works. He's doing just fine. He is seated at the throne of God, resurrected and glorified, King of his Kingdom with the universe thrown in. No, Jesus does not need your good works. But your neighbor does. The people referred to as "the least" definitely need them. And when you move to help them, un-self-consciously; forgetting self and concentrating on their need, you help elevate them and glorify God at the same time.

The power source for this outlook on life comes from Jesus Himself; it is yours by faith. In fact, the more you focus on Jesus, the better. After all, when we were naked, spiritually exposed and shamed, he clothed us in his own goodness. When we were in prison, condemned, sentenced to death, he visited and released us. When we were parched and starving, God satisfied our souls with himself, and he continues to nourish us with the body and blood of his Son. In Jesus' death on the cross he became the very least, descending all the way under our sin; and in his resurrection he is raised all the way to heaven's throne. The Lord Jesus loves the least so much he became the least in order to lift the least to a place of greatness. And it is this willingness to descend, to come down into it, to get your hands dirty, in order to pull others out and lift them up, that's what we mean when we say that an attitude or action is Christ-like.

So let me ask you again: what do you think about those who are called the least?

