

GRATEFUL TO BE OF SERVICE

Matthew 25:31-40

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The passage Joe just read for us is the passage selected many weeks ago for this Sunday, and I will be referring to it later in the sermon.

It's a sermon I finished on Friday afternoon, about an hour before the horrific events which took place in Paris. When I woke up Saturday morning, I re-read my sermon and began thinking and praying about this latest act of terrorism. Then I saw the statement from ISIS, claiming responsibility for the events in Paris, calling the attacks "miracles". It was the use of that word which made me realize I cannot simply preach a sermon I had already prepared for this day. Not in the face of evil which is so offensive and outrageous.

I'm not here as a political commentator; while I certainly have personal political opinions, I don't believe it is appropriate for me to share them from the pulpit. I am certainly not trained as an expert in American foreign relations. My authority to stand here before you comes from my training in Bible and theology and my ordination to the Christian ministry. The only question I am qualified to address this morning is this one: "How does our faith help inform our response to these latest world events?"

So let me read you another passage, this one from Romans. "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit,

serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer...Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

We are told by Jesus to be wise as serpents, and to love God with all our minds. So we are asked to think about world events with the full force of our intelligence, and relying on others whose minds we trust. We are cautioned, then, against, resorting to emotional responses, quick and easy answers. The world is complicated and complex; the answers to the world’s problems will be too.

Can we, as Christians, decry acts of evil and those who perpetrate them, while at the same time resisting completely every attempt to label and discriminate against innocent people? The terrorists do not represent all Muslim people or the Muslim religion.

Can we, as Christians, promote the exercise of sensible caution without resorting to living in fear?

I have two books in my study with similar-sounding titles. One book you’ve probably heard of. Its called When Bad Things Happen to Good People. It was written in 1978 by Rabbi Harold Kushner. Its a classic popular book on the problem of evil. It seeks to address the question humans have been asking for centuries. “Why, if God is good, is there so much evil and suffering in the world?” For Kushner, the question was not merely academic. The book is dedicated to his son Aaron who died at the age of 14 of the disease progeria. Children who have progeria age rapidly and prematurely. As Kushner watched his son grow old before his eyes, he began to question his faith which had always before been rock-solid. In his book he describes his theory that we have a

God who is with us in our most difficult moments, but who does not control our life's events. It is an excellent book which takes its topic seriously but is not overly scholarly.

I have another book on my shelf entitled Why Good Things Happen to Good People. It was written by Dr. Stephen Post, who, at the time he wrote it, was a professor at Case Western Medical School. Post is a professor of bioethics. His field of research is human behavior. He studies, under strict scientific parameters, what happens to people when they engage in acts of charity and generosity.

His book includes a report on a fifty-year study showing that people who are giving during their high school years have better physical and mental health throughout their lives. Other studies show that older people who give live longer than those who don't. Helping others has been shown to bring health benefits to those with chronic illness, including HIV, multiple sclerosis, and heart problems. And studies show that people of all ages who help others on a regular basis, even in small ways, feel happiest.

Two weeks ago, I talked about the scientific research on gratitude. People who express gratitude more often experience better health and well-being. Now we see Stephen Post's research showing us that people who dedicate themselves to helping others have the same health benefits. Now imagine what would happen if we could do both, because actually these two behaviors complement each other quite well. When we're involved in helping other people, we usually have a sense of joy and gratitude. And when we're focused on all of our reasons for gratitude, we tend to want to be more generous, sharing our joy with others.

Stephen Post asked a woman named Jill Niemark, a science writer, to help him write the book. She says that writing this book, and being converted by this research, has changed her life. Here are two of the stories they tell.

Daniel Gottlieb was a practicing psychologist, 33 years old, his career on the rise, when a near fatal accident on the Pennsylvania turnpike severed his cervical spine, leaving him paralyzed from the chest down and in a wheelchair for the rest of his life. The next few years were difficult for him as he faced depression, divorce, and the death of his sister and parents. One hospital stay changed the course of the rest of his life. While he was lying paralyzed in his hospital bed, he struck up a conversation with one of his nurses who was suicidal at that point in her life. He experienced a kind of epiphany, as he realized he could still offer others what he'd always been able to: a deep, warm, listening ear. He found that he was able to help his nurse out of that abyss and convince her to seek help.

He has since continued his private practice, he hosts a mental health call-in radio show in Philadelphia, and he has published four books including one called *Letters to Sam: A Grandfather's Lessons on Love, Loss, and the Gifts of Life*, written to his autistic grandson. His latest book is entitled, *The Wisdom We're Born With: Restoring Faith in Ourselves*. All the proceeds from that book are being donated to a school for disabled children in South Africa. Because of his experience, he has unique understanding into both the solitude and growth that accompany suffering. Through personal and professional experience, Dan has learned that our greatest suffering is alienation and loneliness. These powerful emotions can produce prejudice, hatred,

violence, withdrawal and depression. He has learned that all humans long for human contact, compassion and understanding. And without compassion, our spirits wither. When asked to summarize his life's work, he says simply: "I teach kindness." Daniel Gottlieb is grateful to be of service.

Imagine a boy who escaped to the roof of his ghetto home after his family was slaughtered by Nazis, and then spent two years herding cows for a Nazi sympathizer who never guessed that this twelve-year-old stablehand was Jewish. That boy, Samuel Oliner, became a psychologist. Together with his wife he coauthored an in-depth look at more than 700 Holocaust rescuers, those good people who risked everything to hide, house, feed, and save Jews. He spent his entire career researching the human mind and heart — what was it that caused some people to be so altruistic, so concerned about other people, that they would risk their lives for others?

As I think about this church and what we try so hard to do, I'm keenly interested in his findings. Does it make a difference that we make sure our Sunday School rooms are staffed each week with caring teachers and that our curriculum is carefully chosen? Does it make a difference that our youth are given mission experiences beginning in the 7th grade? Does it matter that we offer hands on giving opportunities from food drives to Habitat for Humanity? Does it matter that we teach a class on understanding Islam, a class that is attended by many members of the Muslim community?

Here's what Samuel Oliner discovered. The people who resisted the Nazis did so because they had been taught compassion and empathy at a very young age. What they were taught in their churches was especially important. Listen to this finding. "Ecumenically inclusive religious or spiritual beliefs, such as regarding all people as

children of the same God, worthy of protection and love, are other important factors associated with helping. We found that among certain rescuers, such as those in Holland, religious factors were very important.”

When we interviewed rescuers in their homes and in their own languages—French, German, Italian, Polish, and Norwegian—these qualities were evident in their descriptions of their motivation:

“Our religion says we are our brother’s keeper.”

“We had to help these people in order to save them, not because they were Jews, but because they were persecuted human beings who needed help.”

“I sensed I had in front of me human beings that were hunted down like wild animals. This aroused a feeling of brotherhood and a desire to help.”

“I was always filled with love for everyone, for every creature, for things. I am fused into every object. For me everything is alive.”

“They taught me to respect all human beings.”

“My parents taught me discipline, tolerance, and service of other people when they needed something.”

I marvel at those who were able to put aside the very real temptation to live in fear, and do the right thing. I like to think that what we are doing here is raising the next generations of people who will be of service to others, not because those others are like us, but simply because they are human beings, children of God, our brothers and sisters.

Our scripture says that when we serve one another, we are serving God.

One of our own saints and mentors here in this church family is Debbie George. After her son Jeremy survived a battle with childhood leukemia, she turned that painful and difficult experience into a veritable factory of good works. She has started an organization called Jeremy Cares, which supports children with critical illnesses and their families. Now in its 7th year, Jeremy Cares has given away thousands of dollars worth of gifts, flat screen TVs for the Ronald McDonald House, college scholarships, and the list goes on and on. Debbie talked at CrossTraining Wednesday night; her face glows with joy when she talks about their work. She says that giving back is absolutely addictive; the more you do, the more you want to do. She is grateful to be of service.

But here's what matters. We each can give. We don't have to start charities, write books or make headlines. We can weave kindness and compassion into our daily lives, treating others with empathy, providing a listening ear, shoveling sidewalks, making casseroles, picking up the phone. It all makes a difference. When we do it for one another, we are doing it for Christ.

There were people in Paris on Friday who immediately began helping the victims, opening their homes, setting up networks so people could discover if their loved ones and friends were safe. There were Sikh temples who opened their doors for people seeking shelter, taxi drivers who turned off their meters to drive people home from the attack zones, thousands who began lining up to give blood. They are resisters, in a way. Resisters to evil. It's what we're all called to be. It may be work that calls us to take a risk sometimes, but if we're following Jesus, the one whose earthly life ended on a cross, do we have any other choice?