

When Charity Isn't Enough

Matthew 25: 31-46

This is the second a “suffering sermon series” prompted by your “Ask Jack” questions. You as a congregation proposed several questions around the issue of suffering and our response to it. This series of sermons deals with some facets of that issue. Last week, the question was, “Is there any gain without suffering?” Next Sunday, we’ll examine the church’s response to suffering in the world from the perspective of a theology of liberation.

The question for today is “how should we respond to suffering in the world?”. The answer I want to share is pretty simple. We should respond to suffering at the deepest level we possibly can in the most honest and helpful way we can according to our giftedness.

The gospel lesson found in Matthew 25: 31-46 depicts the scenario of final judgment. It is the well-known story of the sheep and goats divided before the throne of the Son of Man. Contemporary scholars believe this is not a parable originating from Jesus. It reflects view of the early Christian community that produced the Gospel of Matthew.

The idea of a final judgment is assumed here, as are certain beliefs about heaven and hell, eternal reward, and eternal punishment. They are not the teaching of this story. Those concepts are not what this story is teaching, however. They are the context in which the actually teaching is set, lest we get sidetracked in our contemporary setting.

The sole criterion, in this story, for judgment by the Son of Man is “what did you do for those in need?” What was your response to those in your life who were desperately hungry, thirsty, homeless, shivering, and in prison? The meaning of this story, however, is not the reality of last judgment or even the nature and criteria for that judgment. To find the meaning, look for the surprise.

What surprises both the sheep and the goats? They both said, “When did we see you...? What is surprising is that the Son of Man totally identifies himself with suffering people. There is no equivocating. Meeting the needs of the suffering becomes totally identified with the Christ relationship for the Gospel of Matthew.

Jesus’ example, his own suffering, stands in judgment of our lives and our willingness to enter the crucible on behalf of suffering people in our world. That’s what Matthew was talking about. This is the message the early Christian community placed on the lips of Jesus. This is the key teaching they believed reflected the essence of Jesus’ teaching and of the Jesus faith.

There is an important question for those of us seeking to be faithful to Jesus’ message as conveyed through early Church. How can we meet the needs of the suffering in our world and thus meet the Christ?

It’s hard enough in the small circle of family, friends, and congregation. You who are parents with older children struggling to make the transition to adulthood know how challenging it is. You who are young adults in that struggle also know. We

all know that there's more than a fair amount of suffering going on. In our society, this transition is characterized by depression, eating disorders, substance abuse, other forms of abuse, and suicide. More daunting still it is to try and meet these needs on the larger scale of a city like Kansas City. People have their individual problems. Added to these are issues around housing, employment, crime, and hunger.

On a national level, we can add to those poverty, racism, gender discrimination, and bigotry. On a global scale, we can add to those war, natural disasters, and genocide. The victims who suffer are the very ones we are called to feed, clothe, visit, and comfort. The promise is that they are where we find Christ.

"Whatever you did to the least of these..." is the criterion. What we should do is not a difficult question to answer. It is such a difficult answer to live.

Issues of suffering have an essential sameness whether they take place in a family or within the family of humankind on a global scale. When suffering itself is the problem, our response is to alleviate the suffering. In case of an accident, injury, or illness, this means first aid. Hospital emergency rooms work to alleviate suffering. In a financial crisis, first aid comes in the form of financial aid. When there is an emotional crisis, we respond to suffering by giving comfort. Someone is there when that prized promotion is missed, when your best friend moves away, or when a loved one dies. Comfort is that friendly face when you're alone. Comfort is someone to talk to when you're confused.

Charity has long been the church's response to suffering. These take the form of food pantries, clothes closets, soup kitchens, and emergency assistance to meet the immediate need and alleviate the suffering. An example of this is last year's Tsunami disaster. Charitable organizations helped channel water, food, and shelter, and helped to rebuild. Our own government was quick to respond with charitable assistance to meet the immediate problem of suffering.

What happens when charity isn't enough? Suffering is more than a problem in itself. It can also be the symptom of a deeper problem. Suffering itself can be overwhelming and the immediate respond to ease the suffering is vital. This is as true in a family or personal crisis as it is in a global disaster. But we can get stuck putting out fires, providing emergency aid, and dealing with symptom. And never address the root causes of the suffering.

A good example is the body's physiological system. Pain in one area can indicate a problem somewhere else. Pain in your arm and shortness of breath are symptoms, but the real problem is elsewhere.

The same truth applies to emotions and relationships. Loneliness, anger, or depression are very real forms of suffering, but they are usually symptoms of deeper issues. They might indicate a lack of growth in the partners, a breakdown in communication, or a lack of commitment to the relationship itself.

It's hard to deal with root causes. They usually involve some serious personal transformation. They are often more difficult to fix than symptoms and may call for significant changes within ourselves and in the ways we relate to others. A therapist friend of mine once told me that no one ever came into his office because they wanted

to grow. They were in emotional, and sometimes physical, pain. They wanted it to stop. Not many people stayed around to work on growth issues once their pain was alleviated.

There is suffering in our world today. It is nothing new. There have been heroic efforts to eliminate hunger, poverty, and disease. The War on Poverty was an attempt to spend our society out of poverty. The results were disastrous because, by and large, there was a failure to accept that poverty was actually a symptom. There were deeper causes of American poverty that our society was not able to face and confess. These included the history of slavery and racial discrimination.

Currently, the War on Terror in Iraq is an effort to fight and defeat terrorists without recognizing that terrorism itself is a symptom. The deeper problem involves a fear and distrust of western powers based on the unflattering history of those powers in the Middle East. The deeper problem involves feelings of desperation to strike back at us who are perceived as military and economically oppressive.

The deeper problem involves the historical support of the United States for Israel. It includes our insatiable appetite for Middle Eastern oil. It includes the deep religious fervor of Islam in opposition to Christianity and the serious split within Islam characterized by Islamic fundamentalism. It is affected by the serious issues within Christianity characterized by Christian fundamentalism affecting America's role in the Middle East.

How should we respond as citizens of the United States? That's probably a subject for another day and another setting -- only that we as a nation seem to have quite a different view of ourselves and our actions than does much of the rest of the world. Perceiving and accepting the truth about ourselves, nationally as well as personally, is a crucial first step to dealing with issues that lead to suffering.

The question for us today is "how do people of faith respond to suffering in the world?" Charity is an important response. It has long been the church's favored response. We as people of faith need to be engaged creating and supporting organizations that provide food, clothing, shelter, and prison ministry. Individually, through the church, and in our communities, we need to work with charitable organizations and do acts of charity.

Most suffering, however, is tied to deeper issues. Fear is behind so much of the suffering in our world. Fear of others who are different leads to prejudice and even to war. Fear of not having enough, not being secure enough, leads to greed, to the hoarding of wealth by the few, and to poverty for so many. Fear of being left out ourselves leads to exclusivity in religion and the need to control what and how others believe. Fear of being abandoned leads us to judge others and leave them before they can leave us.

The church has the mission to point this out. It's called being a prophetic voice -- to point to the suffering in our world and also to its deeper causes. We have the calling to hold the truth we see up to the light for all to see, and to confess our own complicity in that suffering. We have another mission as well -- to share a message and a vision of how life can be.

We have a message of hope to share -- that true love casts out fear. This vision reflects what our faith believes to be the will of God. The vision emerges throughout scripture with a God who desire to free a people from slavery; with the concept of Jubilee - when every 50 years all debts are cancelled, all slaves are freed, and all lands are returned to their original owners. The vision shines in the OT prophets who announce the coming of sight to the blind, freedom to the captive, and good news to the poor. The vision comes clearly in Jesus who is identified so clearly with the suffering people of the world. This is our vision, our message, and our mission.

The question for today was "how should we respond to suffering in the world?". The simple answer is, we should respond as deeply and honestly as possible according to our giftedness. When the pain we encounter is the problem, let us respond with charity to ease it. When the pain we encounter is symptomatic of a deep problem, let us embrace the pain and commit ourselves to change within and to become agents of transformation in Jesus' name.

"O God,
who set before us the great hope
that your Kingdom shall come on earth
and taught us to pray for its coming;
give us grace to discern the signs of its dawning
and to work for the perfect day
when the whole world shall reflect your glory." Amen.

--Percy Dearmer (1867-1936)