

A Sermon Preached by Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian on May 8, 2022

SERVING CHRIST IN OTHERS

Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of my brethren, you did it to me.
Matthew 25:45

Today we begin the last section of our year-long focus on the core stories of the Bible. We first looked at the important narratives found in the Old Testament. This was followed by the important events in Jesus's life. We begin this part of our study with Jesus teaching us to care for others.

In this teaching, often called the last judgment, Jesus tells us that we will be judged by how we treat fellow people in need. He goes even further by telling us that when we care for those who need help, we are also showing our love for him. Love for God and love for neighbor become unified in mission.

Last Sunday was what we call Mission Matters Sunday. Our Mission Committee created this event more than ten years ago to give every member of our congregation an experience of hands on mission. This was all part of changing how we at Clarence Presbyterian approach mission.

Clarence Presbyterian, like most churches, had a history of thinking of involvement in mission as check writing. In years past, the task of the mission team was two-fold. Each year the Mission Committee would chose a number of mission projects that it would like to support and then request the Session to include them in the annual budget. The second task was to encourage our Congregation to support special offerings such as the just completed One Great Hour of Sharing.

While this process helped to support some very worthy projects in our community and the world, it did not require many of our members to have any personal involvement in mission.

This all began to change about fifteen years ago. The Mission Committee has sought to encourage not only financial support of mission but also real human involvement. A new process was implemented in which money would flow only to projects where our members were actively involved.

When we first began to think in this way we had almost twenty men and women working for Habitat for Humanity, so it received a lot of support. That became the model for our Mission Committee, money followed people.

Over time therefore our mission budget has shifted as our people have increased their caring for the community. This year we support missions that were not even started fifteen years ago. In the years since, one of our members began a mission called the Birthday Squad which helps provide birthday parties for underprivileged children. Every month, until the pandemic, this group went to Cornerstone Manor to serve women and children in the shelter.

Hearts and Hands is a program that began in Akron that helps to keep elderly people in their homes by providing transportation and doing small jobs around their homes. This program expanded to our community about ten years ago. We have several people, including Kathleen who is on the board, who are very active with Hearts and Hands and we support it.

The Family Justice Center is a program that provides a central place where women suffering from domestic violence can find help. Several years ago, members of our congregation helped to refurbish a building on North Forest to serve as a satellite office. We gave money and labor to make this happen. We continue to support this vital mission.

A new relationship with a mission was begun a several years ago when two of our members went on a mission trip to Africa. They took with them supplies for the people. They returned to share their experiences. We are now part of a group called Kenya Rising.

Another exciting mission that was born in our congregation is Gigi's Playhouse. Gigi's Playhouse is a program that was started in Chicago some fifteen years ago. The playhouse is a Down Syndrome achievement center. It will provide free programs for people with Down Syndrome from birth through adulthood. We have several members who helped to make this dream a reality. Our congregation put in the first dollars. Gigi's Playhouse opened its doors during the first year of the pandemic, yet its programming is thriving.

Why do we think that hands on mission is so important?

One reason is to remind us of how blessed we are. It is easy for us living in Clarence to overlook the hurting people in the world. The successful investor Warren Buffet who held his company's annual meeting last week tells us:

If you're in the luckiest one per cent of humanity, you owe it to the rest of humanity to think about the other 99 per cent.

You and I may not be in the top one per cent, but in terms of the world, we all are in the top twenty per cent of material goods at our disposal. One of the motivations to share with others is gratitude.

A second reason for mission is responding to Jesus' command to love others. Jesus offers us love and forgiveness and grace, but he calls on us to share with others. Throughout the Old and New Testaments the people of God are commanded to share for the marginalized. We read so much in the Bible about widows and orphans because in those days they were the most vulnerable people in society.

So we as individuals and as a church are called by God to stand with those in need.

The most important reason we have created this new model of mission is that personal hands on mission leads to spiritual growth. Francis can teach us of the importance of serving others. Francis learned two things. He learned that serving others changes us and in serving others we serve Christ.

Francis grew up in a rich household. He was fastidious about cleanliness and his appearance. He had a great aversion to that which he considered unclean. He was horrified by the presence of lepers.

In one of the legends we learn this beautiful story. One day St. Francis was walking the empty streets early in the morning before it was light. He was praying but suddenly he heard a cough. There was a dark man in front of him. St. Francis looked at him and noticed the signs of leprosy on his body. There was a purple lesion above his lip. The man was sick. Initially, St. Francis felt fear and a desire to run away – but this was replaced by his desire to help the people of that town. He could not think of anything else to do but to take out his wallet and give the man the money that he had on him.

The man took the money, and shivered. He kept shivering and shivering. He was very thin and very cold. St Francis could see that he had not really met the man's fundamental need. "What can I do now?" he asked the Holy Spirit. Then Francis took off his jacket and gave it to the cold man.

Then St. Francis noticed the man's eyes. They still cried out in need. They were watery with mucus. St. Francis still had not met the man's most fundamental need. Again he asked the Holy Spirit – "I have overcome my initial fright. I have given this man all my cash. I gave him my jacket on this cool morning, what more can I give him?"

At this point St. Francis kissed the leper on the lips. Suddenly, St. Francis noticed the leper was not there! He looked in all directions. The leper had vanished.

It was later when he realized that he had been visited by Christ in a vision.

This story reminds us of two great truths of Mission. First, caring for those in need changes us. We may seek to be involved in mission because we want to make a difference in the lives of others and that is good. But what we discover is that we are changed. Francis overcame his aversion to lepers and became a more loving person. When we serve those who are in need, we too are changed in ways that we cannot imagine. Service helps us grow in faith.

Secondly, this story reminds us that when we serve others, we are serving Jesus himself. Jesus himself tells us, **Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of my brethren, you did it to me.** Sometimes we think that worship is where we connect with God which empowers us to serve. But that is only partially true.

When we serve others we can, like Francis, discover that we are serving Christ. In fact all of our service can be understood as an act of love towards our Lord. People

in need are not always thankful or easy to deal with but they are human beings made in the image of God.

Today I would like to quote somebody I have never quoted before in worship, my wife, Kathleen. As some of you know she worked for Catholic Charities for thirty years. One of her tasks each year was to speak to several parishes during the Appeal time. In 2011 she said in part:

To lay the foundation for what the work of Catholic Charities is about I would like to quote from an article about Mother Theresa. “Once Mother Theresa was asked how she could continue day after day, visiting the terminally ill: feeding them, wiping their brows, giving them comfort as they lay dying. And she said, ‘It’s not hard because in each one I see the face of Christ in one of his more distressing disguises.’

Our mission at Catholic Charities begins with this responsibility to see Christ in every human being and to perform even our smallest actions with love.

We don’t have to go far to find those in need of support. They are all around us as neighbors, classmates and in the line at the grocery store.

A couple, now in their senior years and married for some time, were facing serious health concerns. He was showing beginning signs of memory loss and she was facing physical limitations. They had a marriage in which they both functioned independently and now they needed to rely on one another. They were struggling with how to change these patterns in their relationship. Meeting with a social worker helped them to find healthy methods to cope and care for one another. In this struggling couple we see the face of Christ.

A young woman called us from the homeless shelter. She had only recently arrived in the area, escaping an abusive situation, estranged from her family with no job or services. She had a terrible tooth infection, with part of her mouth obviously swollen, and had gone to the emergency room for assistance. They provided her with a prescription for an antibiotic but she had no way of getting it filled. Catholic Charities was able to provide her prescription and help her connect to other resources. In this troubled young woman, we see the face of Christ.

These are just a few of the every day needs that the Catholic Charities Appeal helps to address and support. At Catholic Charities we are charged to love those who walk through our doors.

This is not just the mission of Catholic Charities. Jesus, in the story of the Last Judgment, calls each one of us at Clarence Presbyterian to love all those we encounter in our lives as being Christ himself. May we live each day learning to see Christ in each person we meet.