

## “When Was It?”

Matthew 25:31-46  
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South Glastonbury  
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When I read again the parable of the sheep and the goats, I was halted, as I always am, by how unconscious the blessed ones are about when it was that they did anything extraordinary for God. “When was it?” they ask. As far as they are concerned, they were just doing the loving deeds that come naturally to mind. You see someone hungry...you feed her! You see someone terribly alone...you befriend him! You hear of someone who’s sick, you take her a pot of soup! It had not occurred to these blessed ones that they were serving God as they served their neighbors!

I found myself bringing to mind people I know who are like that, people who are always doing the kindest things, not because they consciously set out to do some terrific deed, but because it is second nature to them. It’s who they are! So, this Thanksgiving Week sermon is a celebration of all those people who are like the sheep in the parable, the ones for whom kindness is not a strategy but a way of being.

I spend a lot of time in our area hospitals. What I never fail to notice is the way the nurses are like angels; they have their charts and their medication carts and their marching orders, but they also have an astounding capacity for seeing the patient as a real human being, as someone to be respected, as someone who has a story and a family and a faith. I stood in the neo-natal unit the other day at Hartford Hospital and just watched in awe as male and female nurses interacted with tiny babies and their parents, being very professional, very efficient, but also being very loving, very understanding, very compassionate, very tender. Being in their presence was like a religious experience.

I am happy to say I feel the same way on third Sundays at South Church when our own parish nurses take my blood pressure. Last Sunday, the parish nurse took my reading, looked me in the eye, and suggested I go relax, take some deep breaths, put my feet up, and come back in ten minutes and have my blood pressure checked a second time. I did just that! The second time, the numbers were much lower! I left her station in the social hall feeling cared for, feeling like I had been with someone who was doing God's work but had no thought of doing anything lofty or extraordinary. She was one of the sheep from Matthew's parable. This week, let us celebrate the nurses in our midst whose work is really done as a ministry. I could name names, but I'll resist the temptation!

I've been spending a lot of time with my mother. The other day, I happened to be in her home at 11:00 a.m. when the man arrives with her Meals on Wheels hot lunch. I wish you all could be there at 57 Western Avenue any weekday at 11:00. This retired, rather handsome man knocks on the door, enters, and says in a voice as booming as that of Larentiu Rotaro, "Hello Margaret! How are you today?" He sweeps into the dining room leaving the tray where she takes her meals. His smile illuminates the darkest corners of the earth.

There is a joy in this volunteer's heart that is like the joy Beethoven had in mind as he composed the 9<sup>th</sup> symphony! No orchestra accompanies him into the house, but he embodies all of the instruments and all of the rhythms, and all of the joy required to engineer a resurrection! I do not know this man's name. His visits never exceed 90 seconds. But he is one of those sheep from the parable, one of those who delivers a hot meal and a human warmth without giving a thought to it being anything to boast about, anything out of the ordinary, anything to be commended. This week, let us celebrate the ones who drive for FISH and the ones who deliver Meals on Wheels, and the ones who just come crashing into our lives for 90 seconds and leave us changed.

I spend a lot of time with fifteen year olds. We have 26 in the Confirmation class. They have been wrestling with questions about why there is so much violence in the world; questions like what is the connection between music and the soul; questions like what gives anyone authority? Fifteen year old boys and fifteen year old girls are full of energy, full of questions, full of doubts, but also are full of convictions. They know what they are passionate about. One said he is passionate about peace. Another said he is passionate about God, another about dancing, and another about family. If you don't have a 15 year old in your life, I would be glad to arrange for you to borrow one! Life without a high school sophomore must be incredibly boring! One will be speaking at the community Inter-Faith Thanksgiving service Tuesday night. Several had roles in Our Town. Many make the honor role at school. One comes all the way from Coventry. Some have parents who attend other churches. One is fascinated by dreams and their interpretation. And they are all changing the world with their insistence on fairness. I am high on 15 year olds right now. They are like those sheep in the Gospel parable because they are the yeast in the loaf and they don't even know it! They are a light in the world and they act like it's no big deal. Before I ask for volunteers to lug the boxes of journals back up to the office, they just disappear! Last Wednesday, we were missing eight students, so I sat in the middle of the eight empty chairs. I must have looked lonely there because two students came over to keep me company! This week, let us celebrate teenagers because the kingdom of God has been prepared for the likes of them!

I spend a lot of time in the Chevy S10 pick-up truck. I am somewhat of a world news junky and tend to tune into National Public Radio. On Sunday mornings I often listen to Speaking of Faith hosted by Krista Tippett or Weekend Edition hosted by Scott Simon. They interview people who are making a difference because they live their faith in quiet, unheralded ways. Mostly, they are people I have never heard of.

One such story was that of Osceola McCarthy, an African-American woman well into her 80's, from a small town in Mississippi. She didn't trust banks with the money she made washing other people's laundry and cleaning other people's homes. She literally stuck it all under her mattress. Before she died, she decided to count her money to see what she might do with it before it was too late. As I recall, she counted up to \$200,000!! That's a lot of laundry. That's a lot of comfort-denial. She took that money and she donated every penny to the scholarship fund at the University of Southern Mississippi so that young women could gain the education that she had never pursued for herself. I heard that story, and I thought of the sheep in the story Jesus told. I thought of the ones who quietly go about their lives with the lives of others in mind. Osceola McCarthy. It's a name I shall never forget. This week, let's celebrate those who translate their sweat into opportunity, those who translate their labor into love, and those who translate their humility into hope.

It's a Thanksgiving week. I've tried to get in touch with my own gratitude, and this I share in the hope that each of you will get in touch with yours. In the greatest of hope, amen!