



THE THIRD PILLAR: A COMMUNITY OF CARING

November 10, 2019, Twenty-Second Sunday After Pentecost

Matthew 25:31-46

Kimberly L. Clayton, The Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

The Second Pillar of The Brick Presbyterian Church, Education, and its Third Pillar, Mission, have been deeply intertwined from the church's beginning to this present day. The Brick Church School is, at once, part of the church's educational ministry but it is also a central mission of educating children in the city. And Summer Steps is a prominent mission preparing children to enter Independent schools each fall. There is support for the African Dream Academy in Liberia, providing education in an impoverished area of that richly textured country. As far back as 1789, Brick Church supported "Charity Schools" and Sunday or Sabbath Schools, educating children before there was a system of public education in New York.

Adam consistently integrates mission into our youth ministries. Middle and high schoolers volunteer at the New York Common Pantry, cook and share meals with guests in the Wednesday Night Dinner Program, and go on summer mission trips. Just last weekend, Adam led a wonderful intergenerational mission retreat. Education and mission, our second and third pillars, give life to each other. In my initial interview with the Transitional Search Committee, one member teared up as he told how the Wednesday Night Dinner Program had deepened the relationship between parent and child as they volunteered side by side; and how grateful he was that through this church, his child was learning to serve and care for others. The third pillar of the Brick Church is Mission. Our calling to be A Community of Caring.

Such deep commitment to mission is at the heart of our Reformed Presbyterian heritage. We believe God is active in history, working out divine purposes and



plans in our own time. So we are called to discern where and how God is at work and join God in ministries of love, peace, and justice.

Our denomination is currently inviting congregations to become “Matthew 25 congregations”—to be churches with intentional initiatives, taking specific actions to meet the needs of the least, the oppressed, and those who are persecuted and to offer transformative alternatives in the world. The text we heard this morning calls all of us to account, and Jesus spells that out in exquisite, even excruciating detail. By the end of chapter 25, time is running out for Jesus. His final teaching is a vision of ‘the final judgment.’ This one who is about to be judged and condemned by earthly authorities is the very One who will come in glory to judge us. The scene he paints is global: look again—it is not just Christians who are gathered before Christ, but all the nations. People from every country and from every religion, then, too are there. In the end, it turns out, we will not be judged on the orthodoxy of our beliefs, our knowledge of scripture, or the Book of Order. The plumb line is something else entirely. We are measured by this simple, haunting statement: “I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me; I was naked and you gave me clothing; I was sick and you took care of me; I was in prison and you visited me.”

In a slender little book, entitled **How to Spell Presbyterian**, James Angell seems to be speaking right out of this scene when he says: “Mission is the work of Jesus wherever it is done and by whomever it is done. We do not understand the church to be the only tool God can use. The church [can be an] announcer of God’s activity, which may be going on in surprising places, carried on by surprising people.”ⁱ

Our stewardship theme of making divine connections is presented here in Matthew 25 as Christ’s true criteria for those who love and serve God. Good intentions unfulfilled and benign neglect have eternal consequences—not only for those who do not receive the compassion, assistance, and mercy they deserve, but for those of us who might have offered these things, made a contribution with our time and our

* Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.



resources, but did not. The third pillar of Brick's life is not just something we do for others. It turns out mission to others has everything to do with our own salvation. This is why Doug talks about our transformational ministry partnership in East Harlem. Our mission efforts there are based on relationship. As we come to know one another, we learn from each other, connecting our lives in deeper ways, so that together we are all transformed.

Mission at Brick offers Matthew 25 opportunities aplenty: go to Jan Hus and serve a meal; visit, write to people in prison and accompany them as they re-make their lives once they are free. Prepare dinner on Wednesday nights and enjoy table fellowship; look out for older adults living alone in this complex city through Search and Care. It is as much for our own sake as theirs that we visit members who are sick or home bound, join in intercessory prayer, make casseroles that provide nourishment for bodies and souls. From the late 1700s to today, the Deacons of this church have led us in mission to others. The Turkey Drive, the Deacon Christmas Party for families in need are only two examples. Jesus promises to meet us especially in these places, among the very people the world not only overlooks, but scorns.

According to Deane Turner's history of this church, at the beginning of Dr. Spring's pastorate, almost all of the money received from Sunday collections went to pay church expenses. Communion was celebrated once a quarter, and on those 4 Sundays a year there were collections for the poor. To quote a Communion liturgy from Iona, "We cannot take bread and forget those who are hungry." By 1810, an annual collection began, providing support to the Presbytery, General Assembly and for missions in the denomination. Some of your ministers were instrumental in early efforts for Home and Foreign missions. Today, giving grant money remains a priority here, supporting organizations financially. Giving money away is important. Giving ourselves away is essential.

Dr. Henry Van Dyke wanted to increase the participation of members in the life of the church. He said: "no able-bodied Christian...has a right to be merely a passenger in the church." He is right. None of us should be merely a passenger in



the church. We can all participate in mission and financial support. No gift is too small to make a difference. And no gift is so large it will finally be enough.

In a church I served, there was a night shelter for homeless men November through March. Every Wednesday night, along with a sit-down dinner for our guests, we also offered a foot clinic. Faithful, intrepid members came to the gym. Basins of warm water were filled. Fresh towels were held. Members of the church washed the tired, bruised, calloused, and wounded feet of the men who had walked and walked all day. These volunteers cut their nails, placed bandages where needed, massaged spent feet, and then offered a pair of new socks. Over the steaming water, conversations flowed. One church member reflected on why she volunteers there year after year: “It is very meaningful to offer some comfort and relief,” she said. “I like to listen to them and get to know them. And sometimes, after I have washed their feet and we have spent time talking, well, I think I may have seen the face of Christ.” Holiness in a gym. The basics of the gospel made tangible in water, towel, nail clippers, and conversation. Christ is present if we will only look into the face, the eyes, the heart of another.

As with the other pillars, I will offer a transitional pastor’s perspective. Brick Church overflows with mission, but you would be helped to develop a more cohesive narrative of all the ways you are indeed A Community of Caring. Mission is dispersed among so many groups that it becomes a fragmented story. In addition to the Deacons, a Mission Committee and a Grants Committee, youth do mission. And since the mid-1800s, women have led in mission. This week is the 76th Brick Church Fair, where the Women’s Association will give away its proceeds to support agencies helping women and children nearby. Even the Buildings and Grounds Committee is engaged in mission—offering our facilities without charge to multiple groups like the Scouts and AA. Tell the full story of this third pillar.

I also offer two challenges: First, Brick Church needs to reassess its giving to The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) through the Presbytery, Synod and General Assembly. Every congregation has a responsibility to participate faithfully in our connectional church. We should do our fair share. And there are four



denominational offerings every year. You might consider them, joining other congregations so that combined resources make true impact. The second challenge is this: You do so much within this neighborhood and City, but there is a world of need out there. The PCUSA sponsors ministries that make a real difference in the lives of people and their communities on every continent. We can meet Christ in those whose language, culture and needs are different than our own.

Making divine connections in mission happens when we engage, have a conversation, look into the face of another person. Reflecting on our biblical text, Barbara Brown Taylor says: “I will tell you something you already know. Sometimes when you look into those eyes all you see is your own helplessness, your own inability to know what is right. And sometimes you see your own reflection; you see everything you have and everything you are in a stark new light. Sometimes you have such gratitude that it reminds you how much you have to be thankful for, and sometimes you see such a wily will to survive that you cannot help but admire it...but,” she continues, “we cannot know these things about others, ourselves, or Jesus if we will not look.” Mission is not so much money as it is relationships. That, Taylor says, “is both the good news and the bad news today and at the last day, when we will all stand before Christ the king and find out who we are.”ⁱⁱ Through the third pillar, you intend to be: A Community of Caring.

Amen.

ⁱ James W. Angell, *How to Spell Presbyterian, Revised Edition* (Louisville, Kentucky: Geneva Press, 1984,2002), 9-10.

ⁱⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1993), 138.