

Real Faith for Real People:  
“Am I My Brother’s Keeper?”  
Matthew 25:31-46

Dr. J. Howard Olds  
September 30, 2007

“Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these the homeless, tempest-tost to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door.”

As I read those words, once more, inscribed on the Statue of Liberty, I wondered if we Americans believe that any more. Do we really want the world’s huddled masses yearning to be free?

Our founder, John Wesley, had a unique way of weaving personal holiness and social concern into religious conviction. He not only helped people find the Lord, he helped people find food, jobs and health care. He carried a deep passion for the whole person. And he said to the people called Methodists, “Give none that asks relief either an ill word or ill look. Do not hurt them if you cannot help them. And expect no thanks from anyone.”

**WE NEED NEW EYES THROUGH WHICH TO SEE THE LEAST OF THESE.** As Jesus says so eloquently in this troubling parable of Matthew 25, “*I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these, . . . you did for me.*” Do you see Jesus in the faces of the poor, the prisoner, the sick, the stranger?

As you serve the **POOR**, you serve Jesus.

A couple of weeks ago, a worker with the homeless in our city told our staff that you get rid of homeless people like you get rid of coyotes, “You cut off their food supply.” I confronted the guy in the middle of his speech. Since the story is now floating around the church, let me set the record straight. Nobody, and I mean nobody, will stand in the pulpit of any church I serve and compare human beings to unwanted animals that need to be exterminated. In the words of Forrest Gump, “That’s all I have to say about that.”

As you serve the **PRISONER**, you serve Jesus.

In the children’s movie Whistle Down the Wind, Haley Mills and her friends stumble across a vagrant sleeping in the straw, while they are playing in a country barn. The frightened children shout, “Who are you?” The shocked vagrant replied, “Jesus Christ.” What the man meant as an expletive, the children took as a fact. They thought the man was Jesus Christ. So, they treated him with awe, respect and love. They brought him food and blankets; they talked with him, and listened to his story. Their tenderness transformed this ex-convict’s life and

opened his eyes to the Lord. We need to see Jesus.

As you serve the **SICK**, you serve Jesus.

An elderly lady who died in a Scotland nursing home left this note behind, “What do you see nurses? What do you see? What are you thinking when you look at me? A crabbed old woman, not very wise, uncertain of habit, with far away eyes? Let me tell you who I am. I am a child of ten with sisters and brothers. I’m a bride of twenty loving my lover. I’m a mother of children who grew up too fast. I’m a grieving widow, living in the past. So open your eyes nurses, open and see. Not a crabbed old woman. Look closer, see me.”

As you serve the **STRANGER**, you serve Jesus.

A number of people joined this congregation last Sunday. One was a first time visitor, a newcomer to Nashville. In a touching e-mail, she said this to me, “I visited Brentwood just to rule it out, feeling sure I would just be a face in the crowd. But a Sunday school class welcomed me. And your sermon spoke about solving loneliness by finding a community of faith. So I just decided to join.” Open our eyes, Lord, we need to see Jesus.

### **BY WHAT MEANS, IN WHAT WAY, CAN WE SERVE THE LEAST OF THESE?**

First, **DO NO HARM**. Wesley put it this way, “If you cannot relieve, do not grieve.”

Sometimes we console ourselves by noting that we never know all the good we do. Some things just go unnoticed. Perhaps we need to, likewise, confront ourselves by noting that we never know all the harm we cause, and thereby take responsibility for it.

If the first oath of office for a physician is to “Do no harm,” should not ministers, educators, lawyers, and Christians in general be just as concerned?

Jesus was at the temple when the law-enforcing Pharisees brought a woman to him, “*caught in the very act of adultery.*” As they call for her stoning, Jesus stoops and writes in the sand. Then, he straightens up and says, “*You without sin, cast the first stone.*” The first rule of helping is doing no harm.

Think about that the next time you are tempted to send an angry e-mail, gossip about another person, or pass judgment void of understanding.

Second, **DO GOOD**. John Wesley eloquently advised people to “Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, to all the people you can, as long as you ever can.

We do good by “**PRAYING.**” Prayer changes us more than it changes circumstances. It gets our hearts in tune. It makes our motives pure. It gives us

courage to approach all things in Jesus' name.

We do good by “**HELPING.**” In Wesley's mind there was no excuse for personal disengagement from the poor, the sick, the imprisoned.

When J.C. March protested to Wesley that she was too much of a gentlewoman to visit the poor in their wretched homes, Wesley would have none of it. He wrote her back and said, “Take up your cross, woman! Remember the faith! Jesus went before you and will go with you! Put off the gentlewoman; you bear a higher character.”

We do good by “**ADDRESSING SYSTEMIC CAUSES.**” John Wesley not only visited the sick, he also wrote books on promoting health. He worked tirelessly for the end of slavery and advocated major prison reform.

We live in a country where poverty is increasing, where jails are overcrowded, and where 39.2 million people have no health insurance. Can Christians continue to ignore these concerns by blaming the government for inaction? There is enough wisdom in this congregation alone, to bring radical reform to some of the most pressing social needs of our time. Dare we do something about it for the glory of God and the good of humanity?

Finally, we take action by “**INTENTIONALLY FORGETTING.**”

Those who helped and those who hurt had one common response to the situation in this parable of our Lord. “Lord, when?” *“When did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?”* Lord, when? I do not remember when.

The great preacher of a previous generation, Charles Spurgeon, along with his wife, raised chickens and sold the eggs the chickens had laid. The Spurgeons had strict rules about their egg enterprise. Everybody paid. Friends, even family paid. There were no free eggs at the Spurgeon house. Some people concluded the Spurgeons were greedy and selfish. But, the Spurgeons refused to change. Only after their deaths, did the whole story come to light.

All the profits from those eggs went to support two elderly widows. The Spurgeons were not about to let the left hand know what the right hand was doing. And, they were willing to endure the attacks from friends to keep the secret.

Goodness is not a sudden blaze of glory won. It is not an announcement in the paper, or a plaque on the wall in some church. Goodness is done for the glory of God and for the good of the people. That is reward enough, no matter what other people think!

Am I my brother's keeper? The answer is no. That rings of manipulation and

control. I am my brother's brother, for Jesus is a brother to us all!