

i dream of reconnect... responsive

Reconnect – October 18, 2009

Text: Matthew 25:31-46, Galatians 6:7-10

Key Thought: Responsive is following Jesus by pursuing both a relationship with God AND relationships with people, demonstrating God's love to them.

"But when the Son of Man [meaning Jesus] comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit upon his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered in his presence, and he will separate the people as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will place the sheep at his right hand and the goats at his left. Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world. For I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home. I was naked, and you gave me clothing. I was sick, and you cared for me. I was in prison, and you visited me.' Then these righteous ones will reply, 'Lord, when did we ever see you hungry and feed you? Or thirsty and give you something to drink? Or a stranger and show you hospitality? Or naked and give you clothing? When did we ever see you sick or in prison and visit you?' And the King will say, 'I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!' Then the King will turn to those on the left and say, 'Away with you, you cursed ones, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his demons. For I was hungry, and you didn't feed me. I was thirsty, and you didn't give me a drink. I was a stranger, and you didn't invite me into your home. I was naked, and you didn't give me clothing. I was sick and in prison, and you didn't visit me.' Then they will reply, 'Lord, when did we ever see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and not help you?' And he will answer, 'I tell you the truth, when you refused to help the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were refusing to help me.' And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous will go into eternal life." Matthew 25:31-46, NLT

Pre-Intro: "Jesus is my Episco-Pal" (clip from Flashforward S01E04)

Intro: "Everyone wants to help"

- When I saw that clip this week, I thought it would be a great illustration of exactly what we're NOT supposed to be doing as a church...!
- A young adult wants to get involved, and is obviously going through a difficult time
- She comes into the only church she knows, that she rarely attends, and arranges to meet the minister
- The minister has no time for her, doesn't engage her in any kind of meaningful conversation, and instead of listening to her, just passes her off on someone else, deeming her concerns and issues to be "too complicated" to get involved with
- Not only that, but he basically rejects her, saying that they "don't need any help", because in a crisis, everyone wants to pitch in! And then, well - he does give her a pretty cool T-shirt
- And she's left, in a foreign environment, to ponder how she's been failed by the church, by supposed followers of Jesus – again

No shortage of needs

- It's pretty safe to say that there's no shortage of need in our world today
- Open up a newspaper, turn on the TV, or just go outside your door, and you'll probably see a need – if you take the time to look for it – they're all around us, and all over our world – hurting people, lonely people, hungry people, frightened people, people with nowhere to go, people with no-one to care about them
- Some of them are vocal in expressing their need, but many – maybe most – aren't – they go about their lives the best they can, and try to get by the best they can, even with the need that they have
- As I said at the beginning of the morning, there was a time in our culture when many people would seek out the church if they needed help – but that time has passed – and now it's the exception, not the rule
- So, while if someone comes to the church looking for help – or looking TO help – of course we want to respond to that – how do you respond to needs that you don't know about? What does it mean to be responsive when no-one is expecting – or maybe even WANTING – your help?

Two responses:

- **One way** to approach it is to wait – wait until approached, wait until you’re “brought in”
- The problem is, that leads to a lot of sitting and waiting – and hand wringing, and judging, and even looking down on those who “don’t have the sense” to find the help they need
- Remember the Maytag Repairman? The guy who never had to do any work, because all of the Maytag appliances worked so well? Sort of like him, except that the appliances aren’t working well – but no-one’s calling anyway
- The other effect is that you forget how to help – so when someone actually does find their way “in”, you don’t have the foggiest idea of what to do for them (back to the clip again!)
- **Another way** is to get outside the doors and get into people’s lives – because when you know someone, then you really do know – their joy, their pain... and their need
- Then, of course, the rest is up to you, in terms of being responsive, because now you know the need, and you can try to help – or not
- I guess there’s also a **third way** – and that is, to try to ignore the needs of others – which generally leads to the same outcome as in the first way, but without the handwringing or anxiety
- Then again, we can talk about ways of approaching needs all day, but it won’t help anyone in the least

Another Jesus story

- Jesus, sent by God, came into a religious society – a culture that prided itself on helping the needy, on knowing what to do – at least, in theory
- In practice, though - well, there were still lots of needy people, existing side by side with those who were capable of helping, but found other things to do – or waited to be asked – or felt that what they were doing was more important
- In this particular case, Jesus has been telling stories about what “the end” will be like – the end of time – how God will work everything out
- That’s ALWAYS popular with religious people – a debate that can’t be answered, that leaves lots to the imagination – to talk about, to debate about, to go on and on about
- And yet, Jesus’ stories have a way of making you feel uncomfortable – and so the last story that he tells is going to bring everyone that hears it “back to earth” – because suddenly the end of everything goes from being theory to being too close for comfort, too close to home – and that’s what we’re going to look at a little more in depth this morning

Read Text: Matthew 25:31-46

“But when the Son of Man [meaning Jesus] comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit upon his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered in his presence, and he will separate the people as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will place the sheep at his right hand and the goats at his left.

- This section of Jesus’ words is traditionally called “the parable of the sheep and the goats” – even though it isn’t really a parable
- Other than the simile part, where there’s mention of people being divided by Jesus as a shepherd separates sheep and goats in a mixed herd, there’s no parable – but then again, it IS a story with a twist, with an unexpected ending
- It’s the end of time – Jesus has returned to earth to take his rightful place as King, and somehow, in some way, miraculously, the entire world is in front of Him – some being moved one way, and some being moved another
- **Let’s act this out a bit this morning: if your first name starts A-M, then move over here, to my right side – and if your first name starts N-Z, then move over HERE, to my left side**
- And he says that it will look like what a shepherd in their time does with a mixed flock, separating sheep from goats – animals that travel together but that have very different habits and ways – at first glance, maybe, they look the same when all in together, but to the expert eye of the shepherd, they can always be distinguished

Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world. For I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home. I was naked, and you gave me clothing. I was sick, and you cared for me. I was in prison, and you visited me.’

Then these righteous ones will reply, ‘Lord, when did we ever see you hungry and feed you? Or thirsty and give you something to drink? Or a stranger and show you hospitality? Or naked and give you clothing? When did we ever see you sick or in prison and visit you?’

And the King will say, ‘I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!’

- Those on the right – “the sheep” – are commended – welcomed into God’s Kingdom – but their reaction is surprise
- Jesus goes on at length about how they have helped Him – cared for Him, fed Him, visited Him, been there for Him in all of life’s difficult moments – sacrificing their own good and comfort for His
- They are stunned – happy, sure, to be selected like this – but stunned, all the same
 - When did we do all of this? When could we have interacted with you like this?
- Remember, it is “all the nations” in front of Jesus – not just the people of Palestine, in his time – they couldn’t possibly have interacted with Him like this... could they?

- The list of ways in which Jesus has been helped is pretty self-explanatory and central to our human experience: hunger, thirst, loneliness, neediness, illness – but then there’s incarceration – the one that doesn’t seem to fit
- “prison” – back then, you could be thrown in prison for just about anything – and left there to rot, for good – in a oppressive time, prison was used to keep people quiet and obedient – and when you visited, you would bring food and clothing, because it might not be provided otherwise
- We’ve come a long way, where prisons are funded and regulated (at least somewhat) by the State – and yet, prison is still the lowest point in a person’s life – a place where they are forced to reflect on their lives, and what has brought them to that point – and there are people – followers of Jesus – who faithfully go into prison and visit people
 - Ill. – visiting Bob in prison, when I lived in Peterborough – on my baseball team – going to see him – the shock of being in prison – then and since, in other times visiting people – the lack of hope, the resignation, the stifling sense of being trapped, of being somewhere that just shouldn’t “be”
- The crowds in front of Jesus are still trying to register their seeming “good fortune”, when Jesus tells them the criteria he’s been using: when they did it to one of the least of “these”, his “brothers and sisters”, they were doing it to Him
- More on “the least of these” in a minute – but first, the goats – the other side

Then the King will turn to those on the left and say, ‘Away with you, you cursed ones, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his demons. For I was hungry, and you didn’t feed me. I was thirsty, and you didn’t give me a drink. I was a stranger, and you didn’t invite me into your home. I was naked, and you didn’t give me clothing. I was sick and in prison, and you didn’t visit me.’

Then they will reply, ‘Lord, when did we ever see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and not help you?’

And he will answer, ‘I tell you the truth, when you refused to help the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were refusing to help me.’

- Jesus turns to the people on his left hand side – multitudes, uncountable numbers – and addresses them exactly the opposite way – everywhere the first group was praised, the second is condemned
- Everywhere the first group had unwittingly succeeded, the second group had unwittingly failed – and again, the reaction is surprise - when had they ever had the chance to help Jesus, and refused? When had they turned Him away or neglected Him?
- And again, just as with the first group, the answer is that they had been graded on how they had responded to Jesus as “the least of these”

And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous will go into eternal life.”

- Those on Jesus’ left hand leave His presence, forever – but the ones who are called “righteous” – the ones who helped “the least of these” – continue in Jesus’ presence, forever, in His Kingdom

The least of these?

- So who are “the least of these”, anyway? Who is it that Jesus is looking for to be helped?
- Some over the last 2000 years have said that these people are missionaries – people taking the message of Jesus to places that have never heard – if you were kind to them, it was evidence that you were “a sheep” – someone who had been changed by Jesus
- But I’m not so sure – why would Jesus call them “the least of these”? Seems awfully specific, when it seems like Jesus is being very wide open
- Others have said that he was talking about Christians in general – that if people were kind to Christians, then they were the “sheep” – either that they had pleased Jesus by being kind to his spiritual family, or that they had demonstrated that they belonged to Jesus by being kind to God’s people
- Again – it seems sort of limiting – and sort of like doing gymnastics to get to the other side of the gym, instead of just walking there
- A third group has said that this is just based on humanity – that Jesus is talking about kindness to anyone and everyone – that “the least of these” are the poor and downtrodden of every society, in every time and place – that Jesus identifies with them and counts every kindness to them as kindness to himself
 - This view drives some people crazy, because then it seems like the way to please God is just to do good deeds – that you could somehow work your way into heaven, on your own steam – which the New Testament goes to great lengths to say over and over again that it’s not possible
- But what if there are elements of all of them? What if this is both/and?
- Every kindness we demonstrate is a reflection of God’s image in us – that we were originally created by God to be like Him – and God is completely loving, completely accepting, full of compassion
- When we show that compassion, when we make that sacrifice, we are acting like God would – and with the right attitude, which is key, then we are making room for God to work in us
- After all, what gets in the way the most of God working in us, but our own egos? Our own desires? Our own sense of entitlement? Our own pleasures, our own responsibilities – us, us, us?
- And how else could you or I ever hope to make that kind of giving, that kind of helping a lifestyle, unless God was helping us to do it? Unless He was at work in us, changing us?
- He works with us – he works in us – to do these things, to enable us to do more and more, and to give up our natural selfishness and instincts for self-preservation to help others in return

Sacrifice and helping others as a lifestyle

- This week I had the privilege of participating in the Juvenile Diabetes Ride Foundation’s Ride for Diabetes Research – and the muscles in my posterior are still feeling it!
- The goal of JDRF is to find a cure for Type 1 diabetes – the kind you generally get as a kid, that you can’t avoid – and it’s a great cause, supported by a lot of Canadian corporations, especially those in the financial sector, including my bank
- So there we all were, a bunch of us chubby bankers, down at Ottawa City Hall, riding stationary bikes, with the tunes rocking, making lots of noise, egging each other on to pedal faster

- It's an extremely well run event – well coordinated, well organized – and like so many different fundraisers these days, there are plenty of incentives to raise funds – the more money you bring in, the more swag you get – a massage, a gourmet lunch, a bigger gift card to a ride sponsor store, hats, shirts – all kinds of loot
- That's one of the trends in fundraising these days, isn't it? The pampering?
- More and more we're seeing exclusive fundraiser events – where you have to raise X number of dollars to participate, and then you can get into this or that event and be pampered – sort of playing both to our shared desire to help AND our desire to compete with each other at the same time!
 - (which is sort of like putting sweet and salty and fatty in the same snack food, and works every bit as well)
- But what if fundraisers didn't have the swag they do? What if it wasn't a big business like it is? What if there weren't lineups of people telling you and themselves how noble you all were for doing such a great thing?
- I sure didn't feel that great – sure, I asked some people for some money, and I gave some, too – but to go and ride a bike for a few minutes wasn't all that noble, especially when it was instead of being at work! It was more fun than sacrifice
- They talk about “donor fatigue” these days in Ottawa – where there are so many causes, all vying for the same wallets, and all colliding with each other – this multimillion dollar business – fundraising directors of big nonprofit charities make six figure salaries, businesses want to cash in on the idea of doing something good (like pink for breast cancer) even if hardly anything is actually going towards the actual cause! (no oversight, no accountability – you can just jump on the bandwagon) – everyone is trying to tap into this common human trait we all share of “everyone likes to help”
 - There are these two boy scouts that sell me stuff at my house – popcorn, pumpkins – trying to raise money for a trip to England next year, and more power to them!
 - And I can't seem to say no to anyone who comes to my door, because I used to HATE the rejection I experienced as a kid going door to door for minor hockey in Brockville!
- And of course, in a recession, people's thoughts turn back more towards home and their own needs, not those of others
 - Back on Thursday this week there was a front page article in the Ottawa Citizen about how “Recession leads Canadians to reflect” – and basically, the results were that a person's career wasn't everything – according to the head of the people that did the survey, “People are saying there's more to life than this... It doesn't mean they're about to give up their day job. Instead they are making time for themselves in addition to meeting their regular commitments in search of their own personal vision of meaning and fulfillment”

Helping as a lifestyle – when it gets personal

- Isn't that the tension of being human? There's something in us that says it's right to help people – something that taps into who we were made to be
- But then right alongside that, there's our sense of entitlement – who is going to help us? If we don't help ourselves, then who will? We have to look after ourselves, after all!
- Our natural busyness, in our technologically saturated world, doesn't help, does it? Less time – so we write a cheque – or we get involved in some limited way, in a way that we can turn off and on at our choosing, so that it doesn't really limit us or affect us in a lasting, transformative way
- I went downtown to ride in a fundraiser – but I didn't have to help someone with Juvenile Diabetes get a needle – or invite someone into my life – at the end of it, I went back to work and left that world
- And yet, just as in the Coldplay song we played earlier, our heart's cry is to "Fix You" – to help the people that we love, that we know, who are closest to us
- Our busy lives aren't conducive to helping, beyond writing a cheque, or giving a little bit of our time – there's no time for more relationships, probably messy ones, and actually getting in and helping, truly relating to people beyond a handout
- And yet, church was meant to be a group of people who welcomed people in to do just that – to fold their arms around people, in all our messiness, and embrace us and walk with us – not solving all of everyone's problems, but offering tangible help AND presence along the way, walking together in this journey
- What could we do to benefit Barrhaven, the suburb that has everything? This one used to keep me up at night... how do we make a big splash? How do we get noticed? How do we make the community papers, get profiled in the Citizen, get on the radio, get invited to great parties?
- Maybe instead of a macro-event, we need to keep doing it one life at a time – maybe that's the "mustard seed" at work – the organic spread of something that pushes everything else out of its way, a little at a time – the Kingdom of God

Key Thought:

Responsive is following Jesus by pursuing both a relationship with God AND relationships with people, demonstrating God's love to them.

You will always reap what you sow! Those who live only to satisfy their own sinful desires will harvest the consequences of decay and death. But those who live to please the Spirit will harvest everlasting life from the Spirit. So don't get tired of doing what is good. Don't get discouraged and give up, for we will reap a harvest of blessing at the appropriate time. Whenever we have the opportunity, we should do good to everyone, especially to our Christian brothers and sisters. **(Galatians 6:7-10, NLT)**

Conclusion: Keith Green/"The Sheep and The Goats"

- End with Keith Greene, tell his story
- A gifted musician, from a family with a background in the music industry, he was groomed by his dad to be a teen idol, but it didn't happen – and it sent him into a spiral, that ended when he became a Christian through reading the New Testament
- He started re-evaluating his life – and devoted himself to seeing people come to Jesus through his music – and calling Christians to get serious about their faith at the same time
- His tag line was “no compromise” – but the bigger he got, the more he wrestled with his own failings, knowing that he wasn't perfect
- So he started doing his concerts for free – and giving away his music, for whatever people wanted to pay for it – long before Radiohead did it over the internet, Keith Green was doing it back in the early Eighties – paying for everything out of pocket, going into debt to do it
- Not only that, but with a wife and a young family, he created a retreat centre – initially just by buying a few homes in his neighbourhood – for recovering drug addicts, prostitutes and other “down and outers” to live and get their lives back together
- He continually strove to match his words with his actions – to match what he was calling people to become with what Jesus was making him
- And that's the heart behind... this [show “The Sheep and the Goats” video]
- Keith Green died in 1982 at the age of 28, killed tragically in a plane crash – but his example lives on, as a follower of Jesus who didn't only help people from a distance, but who invited people into his life, because of His love for God and his gratitude at what God had done in his life
- He had been changed by the cross of Jesus – by seeing all of the sins he had ever done go falling off his back, off his conscience, off his “record” – and being set free by His love
- “When I die I just want to be remembered as a Christian” – Keith Green

The question:

- So here's the question: where is Jesus in your life? Where are you helping Him? Where are you clothing him, feeding him, visiting him – helping him, coming alongside him... in the “least of these”?
- My prayer for you this week is that you will look for Jesus – in the faces of the people you come in contact with – and that when you see Him, you will help Him – take that moment for Him, or that hour, or that extra load on your back – the extra bit of sacrifice, the extra commitment – and that you will recognize who you are doing it for – for the one who has done so much for each of us