

Did you know that St. John's has a purpose statement? For those of you who said you knew it, can one of you say it? Don't worry when it comes to organizations, purpose statements, and people knowing those purpose statements, you aren't alone in not knowing about them or what is contained in them. Let's look at our purpose statement together for a moment.

POWERPOINT SLIDE

The reason why this may be the first time you've seen this is our fault. And I apologize personally for that. You see, we have to be intentional about things like this. We need to make our purpose statement a part of everything we say and do. That's why for the next 3 weeks we're going to go through each section of it.

Today we will start with the first section:

BACK TO SERMON SLIDE

To Welcome and affirm all people to experience the love of God.

We will use Jesus' passage about the sheep and goats to learn what it means to be welcoming. Let's start though by looking at some examples of church greeters you might not want to encounter when you get to church on Sunday.

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When we talk about being welcoming, I can think of no better place to go than the story of the sheep and goats from our passage today. Here in Matthew 25, Jesus is talking about the final judgment. The time when the "goats" and the "sheep" will be separated. When I've heard sermons about this passage, it seems like more detail was placed on what would happen to those mangy goats. The fiery end that would come to them. Scary stuff. Enough to make your skin crawl. Don't be a mangy goat is what we learned.

Since there are more than enough terror sermons about this passage, I want to go a different direction. I want us to look at the list of characteristics that Jesus is looking for in his sheep. In his disciples. In his church. And coincidentally, our word of the day appears in these characteristics.

In the beginning of this passage, Jesus says that all nations will be gathered together. This isn't just talking about Jews. This isn't just talking about Gentiles. All are included in this universal judgment. And notice something else. When the judge starts speaking to them, nothing is mentioned about them being a Jew, a Gentile, or even a believer in Christ. Those were not the things that mattered to the "Son of Man". What mattered was whether or not they showed compassion. Whether or not they practiced the second greatest commandment which is, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Using the analogy of separating sheep and goats would be familiar to these Middle Eastern listeners. It was virtually an everyday practice in their world. You see when it was cold, goats needed to be sheltered but sheep did not. Just as it was the shepherd that decided which animal was a sheep and which animal was a goat, it is our good shepherd that decides the fate of humanity in the final sorting. In this analogy, the way the righteous ones display true piety is by performing acts of mercy.

How does the Good Shepherd determine who his sheep are? Let's review them again from vs 35 & 36. "For 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 this analogy, the way the righteous ones display true piety is by doing their acts of mercy unintentionally. They aren't doing it with an expectation of being seen or rewarded. They are honestly surprised to learn that they've been discovered. Their compassion for these unnamed, unknown least of these was not for garnering social approval. It was not to receive a divine blessing. It was not done with the expectation of mutual benefit.

And the categories of compassion that we just listed shouldn't have been news to Jesus' Jewish listeners. These were typical of any acts of mercy expected in practicing Judaism. Think about how these listed acts of mercy played into every aspect of Jesus ministry. Think about how Jesus sent his disciples out to perform these exact acts of mercy.

Only one thing listed here wasn't part of Jesus or the disciples' ministry, visiting prisoners. But many scholars believe this points to the persecution that was being experienced in the early church, where followers like Paul were indeed put into prison.

Jesus solidarity with and advocacy for the least, the little, and the lost comes to its full realization in this text. And what was the reaction of those both on the left and the right? Surprise. So surprised that they had to ask the question, "When did we see you..."

You see at the time of the writing of Matthew's gospel, that promised Parousia, that promised return of Jesus just hasn't happened yet. This means the most important question was changing. It was no longer a question of "When will the Son of Man come in all his glory." Now the question of the day was "How shall we live while we wait.?" That is still the question, isn't it?

As I look at this list, I'm reminded of a quote I once heard. "Don't put a period where God put a comma". (Repeat) That list of characteristics from vs 35 & 36. It sure had a lot of commas. Do you think this list is the sum total of all the ways in which we can look out for the least of these?

Let me tell you the story about a boy named Teddy Stallard. Teddy taught his 5th grade teacher, Miss Thompson not to place a period where God had placed a comma.

Teddy was a least of these. Disinterested in school. Wearing musty, wrinkled clothes. His hair was never combed. All day long he sat with a glassy, unfocused stare. When Miss Thompson spoke to Teddy he answered in monosyllables. Unattractive, unmotivated, and distant, Teddy was hard to like. Even though his teacher said she loved all in her class the same, deep down inside she wasn't being completely truthful.

Whenever she marked Teddy's papers, she got a certain perverse pleasure in putting X's next to the wrong answers and putting Fs at the top of his papers. And boy did she do these with flair. She should have known better because she had Teddy's records. She knew more about him than she cared to admit.

1st Grade: Teddy shows promise with his work and attitude, but poor home situation.

2nd Grade: Teddy could do better. Mother is seriously ill. He receives little help at home.

3rd Grade: Teddy is a good boy but too serious. He is a slow learner. His mother died this year.

4th Grade: Teddy is very slow. but well-behaved. His father shows no interest.

It was Christmas time, and the kids in Miss Thompson's class brought her Christmas presents. They piled them on her desk and crowded around to watch her open them. Among the presents there was one from Teddy Stallard. She was surprised that he brought her a gift.

Teddy's gift was wrapped in plain brown paper and held together with scotch tape. On the paper he'd written "For Miss Thompson. From Teddy." She opened Teddy's present and out fell a gaudy rhinestone bracelet with half the stones missing along with a bottle of used cheap perfume. The other boys and girls began to giggle and smirk over Teddy's gifts. But Miss Thompson silenced them by immediately by putting on the bracelet and then some of the perfume. She held her wrist up for the other children to smell. "Doesn't it smell lovely?" The children caught on and agreed with "oo's" and "ah's."

When the day was over and the other children left. Teddy lingered behind. He slowly walked over to her desk and said softly, "Miss Thompson...Miss Thompson, you smell just like my Mother...her bracelet looks real pretty on you. too. I'm glad you liked my presents." When Teddy left. Miss Thompson got down on her knees and sobbed. She asked God to forgive her.

When the children came back to school, they were welcomed by a new teacher. Miss Thompson was a different person. No longer just a teacher, Miss Thompson was also an agent of God. She was committed to loving her children and doing things for them that would live on after her.

She helped all the children, but especially the slow ones, and especially Teddy Stallard. By the end of that school year. Teddy showed dramatic improvement, he had caught up with most of the students and was even ahead of some.

Several years went by. Seven to be exact. One day she received a note that read:

Dear Miss Thompson,

I wanted you to be the first to know. I will be graduating second in my high school class.

Love,

Teddy Stallard

Four years later, here came another note:

Dear Miss Thompson,

They just told me I will be graduating first in my class. I wanted you to be the first to know.

University hasn't been easy. but I liked it.

Love,

Teddy Stallard

Four more years went by and here came one more note:

Dear Miss Thompson,

As of today. I am Theodore Stallard. M.D. How about that? I wanted you to be the first to know.

I am getting married next month, the 27th to be exact. I want you to come and sit where my mother would sit if she were alive. You are the only family I have now. Dad died last year.

Love,

Teddy Stallard

Miss Thompson went to that wedding and sat where Teddy's mother would have sat. He knew that she deserved to sit there: she had done something for Teddy he would never forget. Miss Thompson replied in her letter back to Teddy: ...

“Dear Ted,

Congratulations! You made it and you did it yourself! In spite of those like me and not because of us, this day has come for you. God bless you. I’ll be at your wedding with bells on.”

In Matthew Jesus was commending those who are able to go beyond the boundaries that we set. To go beyond welcoming those who are just like us. “To stop classifying people by the families they come from, the clothes they wear, the school they went to, where they live now...or don’t live, how much money they have. To welcome everyone, regardless of barriers or distinctions.

To be among the righteous is to live out the love of neighbor, demonstrating justice through acts of mercy for the most vulnerable. When we live like this, we will never be in a position to say “I really was not expecting you – not here and not now – and certainly not in the “distressing disguise of this needy person in front of me.

Let’s not put a period where God has placed a comma. Let’s agree to be those who give food, water, welcoming, comfort. Don’t do it for fear of the eternal fire. Do it with no expectation. But do it knowing you may never know who you’re serving. As the author of Hebrews said in chapter 13:2, Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

Let’s repeat our purpose statement one more time.

POWERPOINT SLIDE.

Welcoming. This is us, St. Johns Church Family. This is Us.

Let us pray.