

SERMON  
 First Lutheran Church  
 Aitkin, Minnesota

Matthew 25:31-46  
 Rev. Darrell J. Pedersen  
 November 25, 2012

### **ADULT MESSAGE - "COME"**

It was just a little above freezing. The moon was full and the big dipper was directly overhead. I was headed for my Thursday, November 8, 2012 deer stand. An owl's sharp cry penetrated the silence. Later, as the sun rose, little birds flittered into the woods around me. Before long I heard the sounds of rustling squirrels, crows and distant cows. Blue jays, a pileated wood pecker and a porcupine came to visit. No deer came that day.

**It happened to me again this year.** After a few hours in the deer stand, looking down from fifteen feet above, I became overwhelmed; awed by the **amazing world** I live in. I was awed by the **amazing God** who gives me life and everything that I need. My frequent refrain again this deer season was "**Thanks be to God!**"

Maybe you are familiar with **Dr. Gary Chapman's** book, "**The Five Love Languages**." In this book, Dr. Chapman tells us that our **basic human needs** include **security**, **self-worth** and **significance**. He says "**love interfaces with all of these**." I believe that **God's love** speaks to those basic human needs for us **right here today**.

- **Security** - God promises to **care for us** in every way, every day and forever.
- **Self-worth** – Just as we are God sees us as **precious**.
- **Significance** – With God's help, we can make a **life-giving difference** in this world.

Dr. Chapman argues that when our basic needs for security, self-worth and significance are met, we are **set free to develop our potential**. (p. 143)  
**Have you been set free? What is your potential?**

Please consider our Gospel text. Jesus is talking about what will happen on the **last day** as all the people of the world come into the presence of Jesus, the King, the Living God. It sounds like some **separation** will be going on... Some people go to **heaven** and some to **hell**.

To those on Jesus' right side, he will say, "**Come.**" That word is **Jesus' invitation** for **every person** to draw closely into the **embrace of God.** Which people does Jesus invite? They are the ones who are:

- **Blessed** – those who have already received good gifts from a generous God.
- **Inherit** – those whose names have already been written into God's will.
- **Prepared** – without a doubt, there is already a place waiting for them at the table of the Lord.

Do you see it? The **human actions** that Jesus is about to spell out (feeding the hungry, clean water to drink, etc.) are **all preceded and drawn out** of them by God's generous love and care for them since the beginning. It is the **"righteous"** who are embraced by God. I used to think that a righteous person was one who never did anything wrong. "**Never did anything wrong**" – good luck with that then. Read the scripture carefully and you will discover that a righteous person is simply one who is living in a **love-trust relationship** with God. And, because of that relationship God forgives/overlooks their sins and brokenness. **Righteousness** looks like a **blessed, loved and forgiven person** loving and trusting God. And it looks like that **same person** loving and caring for other people.

**God's plan** is to care for us and the whole world now and forever, **eternal life – pure gift!** **Our human plan** is to take care of ourselves now and Lord only knows what happens forever – **tragedy.** I believe that we can get a **taste of heaven** here and now – by being in a love/trust relationship with God – in **God's faith community.** I believe we can get a **taste of hell** here and now – by trying to care for ourselves without God's help – **alone.**

In Jesus' description of the last day, some people get turned away from God – "**depart from me into eternal fire and punishment.**" How's that for a **wake-up call?** Does God want that? Jesus here lifts up the **worst possible thing** that can happen to us – **abandoned by God.** God doesn't want that. Do you? **We abandon God all the time,** but **Jesus would rather die** than see anyone turned away from God's love and care. If we're living our life as though we are **all alone here,** why should we expect anything different in the life to come? On the other hand, if we are **living our lives like we are in the love and care of God here,** why should we

expect anything different in the life to come? **Jesus says, “Come!” to every one of us!**

In this Gospel text, Jesus literally reveals the **heart of God**. God’s heart is always moving to love and care for us and for every person in the world. **When someone cares for us** in the midst of our need, it is Jesus who is helping us. **When we help someone else** in the midst of their need, it is Jesus that we are helping. **When we look in the mirror**, we are looking at Jesus. **When we look at someone in need**, we are seeing Jesus.

Jesus commended the people for **sharing food, water and clothing**. Jesus commended the people for **welcoming the stranger**, and for **visiting the sick** and **those in jail**. Those actions reflect the heart of God; reflect Jesus’ very real presence in and through us. The people who did these things didn’t even realize that they were doing anything special. **They weren’t caring in order to be saved**. They were caring **because they trusted God to take care of them**. Having salvation means wholeness and healing in our relationship with God and with people. Salvation means having our basic needs for **security; self-worth and significance** met – all wrapped up and delivered in God’s love for us.

Today, Jesus **challenges** us all. **It’s not “do good stuff or go to hell.”** **It’s “come”** - love and trust me to take care of you. **And if we do that**, we will be **set free** to give ourselves away in love and care for neighbor and world – set free to develop our **God-given potential**.

It is First Lutheran Church’s annual stewardship drive time. **What does God ask of us?** Is it **“first fruit,” 10%** of our income as we hear again and again in the Old Testament: Is it **proportionate/percentage giving** as we hear in the New Testament? Jesus said, **“give and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”** (Luke 6:38) Jesus talks more about money than almost any other topic. This is **not a financial question, but a spiritual question**. **How much do you trust God?** God doesn’t need our sheep, our money or our time. But the neighbor does and we need to share them if we are truly going to be able to trust God. **Does God want 10%, 5% or 15%?** No, **God wants us to love and trust God with our WHOLE LIVES** and when we do, **good things follow**, for us and for the world around us. When we truly believe that we are **“safe in the hands of Jesus,”** **then**

loving God and loving people simply flows through us from God. I used to think that “stewardship” campaigns were all about begging people to give money to the church. I now know that “stewardship” is “everything we do after we say, ‘I believe.’” Stewardship is our opportunity to live fully, joyfully, into the love and life that God has given to us. Our giving doesn’t deplete us. Our giving blesses us.

So then, when we are visiting the sick, it is a sign/symptom of us already being in the heart of God. When we are feeding the hungry it is a sign/symptom of us already trusting God to feed us. When we are welcoming the stranger, it is a sign/symptom that we have already truly experienced God’s own gracious welcome for ourselves. When we generously share our money it is a sign/symptom that we believe that it all comes to us as gift from God in the first place.

This past winter I visited a dying woman from my first parish. After years of illness, she lay ever so still in her bed while her husband lay down close beside her. I stood by the bed, hand on her shoulder. Jesus was there too. That death bed visit was all about Jesus. It was all about her looking forward to going home to be with her loving God, no more suffering, no more pain, no more tears. Going home to be with God is not about how good we are, but about how good God is. Nothing else matters when you come to that last day, except that some folks love you and you love them. And God loves you and you love God. In that love and trust we find the life God created us for and longs to bless us with here and now and forever. Are you loving and trusting God? God has promised to love and care for you to death and beyond. Do you believe that? Does your life look like that?

What does God plan to bring about in our personal lives in the year ahead? What does God plan to bring about among us here at First Lutheran? God has gathered us and calls us family. What is God asking of you, and of me, in the year ahead? It’ll be fun to see what God has in store, what God will bring about as together we love and trust God.

Up in that deer stand, at work, at home or the next time you run into a need out there in the world, how you live, what you do is all wrapped up in Jesus’ love and care for you and the rest of us. There we find our eternal hope – Jesus loves and cares for us and for the whole world. That’s why we give... Thanks be to God. Amen.