

“What Is Saving Your Life Right Now? Encountering Others”  
Matthew 25:31-45

One of the toughest challenges of our time right now is coming in contact with other human beings because we know that is how the coronavirus is spreading. If you are walking down the street and people are coming your way, most likely you start making plans of how to avoid getting closer to them than 6 feet. Social distancing has left us isolated in so many ways and this works against our innate need to be in community. Even the introverts among us are having a hard time not being able to be in community with others in the normal ways we are used to being together. In her book, *An Altar in the World*, Barbara Brown Taylor talks about the practice of encountering others as one of the ways to save our lives. By learning to see the sacred in others, we can see the sacred in ourselves. That is how God created the world.

In a strange way, this time of isolation is helping us reevaluate our assumptions about relationships and human connections. It is helping us to see how much we depend on each other and how much our well-being, physically, mentally, and spiritually depends on others. So this could be a time of examining all that we know or think we know about community and human interactions.

To get a clear perspective, we are looking at Jesus' teachings to the disciples about our connection to others. Parables were Jesus' preferred way of teaching and preaching to help shift people's perspective and ideas about life. This parable is about two ways of relating to others in the world represented by two groups: the sheep and the goats. The one group (goats) lives by the values of the world. They don't share the love of God with others and thus don't have compassion for their neighbors or the stranger. They keep compassion to themselves and to those they love. Those outside of their familial or social circles are invisible to them. The other group (the sheep) is the one living by the values of the kingdom of God. They are continuing to let God's love flow through them not just to their family and friends, but also to all the people in need. They live by the principles of Christ's compassion. The shocking part of the parable is that both groups did not realize that what they were doing was directly done to Jesus himself. The ones who cared for the needy did not know that it was Jesus in disguise that they were caring for. In the same way, the ones who did not care for the needy did not know that it was Jesus in disguise that they neglected. This is the shock of the parable. Their motivation was not to please or impress. They were living out their values instead of the values of the world. Faith involved caring for those who were vulnerable in society. It required recognizing that God was to be found in the suffering of our neighbors. The coronavirus crisis is showing us how much we need each other, not just to get the services we need, but also for the spiritual and social support we get from being together. The journey of life cannot be taken alone. We need companions on the way. The potential for growth through community is tremendous. Yet, community is one of the places we struggle so much. We learn from an early age to fit in and in the process of doing that, we reject or hide parts of ourselves that we deem to be unacceptable and could potentially prevent us from belonging. Recently, our brothers and sisters in the Asian American communities felt a special threat to their belonging because of the

coronavirus and the public misconception that the virus came to us from China. This is one of the many manifestations of this kind of fear in community.

In his book, *Hidden Wholeness*, Parker Palmer writes about this kind of suppression of who we truly are, which leads us to live divided on the inside and the outside. We forget who we are at the deepest level. At the soul level, there is a hidden wholeness. In the deepest way, we are whole, and that's the place where we belong to God and we know we belong to God. We remember that we were created in God's image. Yet, in order to reclaim that wholeness, we need community. We need each other. We need to be intentional to create communities where our souls show up and where we see our common experiences of souls. Our healing depends on being able to recover those parts of ourselves that we rejected and to allow others to do the same.

This week I think that one of the symbols of this crisis can become a reminder for us of our need to be open with others to drop our social and psychological masks. The masks we are wearing are intended to protect us from the virus, but maybe they can be reminders for us of our common humanity and our common vulnerabilities. What if the masks on our faces can help us connect with the masks we wear on the inside, but that end up separating us from others?

In this time of social distancing and as we are separating from each other, maybe we can take time to learn to be with each other in new ways. Just like we are learning to worship together online or to meet via Zoom, what if we learned what it takes to be together in ways that bring healing and wholeness. Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "The hardest spiritual work in the world is to love the neighbors as the self--to encounter another human being not as someone you can use, change, fix, help, save, enroll, convince or control, but simply as someone who can spring you from the prison of yourself, if you will allow it. All you have to do is recognize another you 'out there' --your other self in the world --for whom you may care as instinctively as you care for yourself." This is what Jesus was inviting his followers to see. They were being challenged to love and serve the stranger in need as a way to connect with their common bond with humanity.

Palmer suggests some concrete ways for creating communities that heal. These come from his guidelines for circles of trust:

- Extend and receive welcome. People learn best in hospitable spaces. In this circle, we support each other's learning by giving and receiving hospitality.
- Be present as fully as possible. Be here with your doubts, fears and failings as well as your convictions, joys, and successes, your listening as well as your speaking.
- What is offered in the circle is by invitation, not demand. This is not a "share or die" event! During this time, do whatever your soul calls for, and know that you do it with our support. Your soul knows your needs better than we do.
- Speak your truth in ways that respect other people's truth. Our views of reality may differ, but speaking one's truth in a circle of trust does not mean interpreting, correcting, or debating what others say. Speak from your center to the center of

the circle, using “I” statements, trusting people to do their own sifting and winnowing.

- No fixing, no saving, no advising, and no setting each other straight. This is one of the hardest guidelines for those of us in the helping professions. But it is one of the most vital rules if we wish to make a space that welcomes soul, the inner teacher.
- Learn to respond to others with honest, open questions instead of counsel, corrections. Such questions help us hear each other through deeper speech.
- When the going gets rough, turn to wonder. If you feel judgmental, or defensive, ask yourself, “I wonder what brought her to this belief?” or “I wonder what he’s feeling right now?” or “I wonder what my reaction teaches me about myself?” Set aside judgment to listen to others -and to yourself -more deeply.
- Attend to your own inner teacher. We learn from others, of course. But as we explore poems, stories, questions, and silence in a circle of trust, we have a special opportunity to learn from within. So pay close attention to your own reactions and responses, to your most important teacher.
- Trust and learn from the silence. Silence is a gift in our noisy world, and a way of knowing in itself. Treat silence as a member of the group. After someone has spoken, take time to reflect without immediately filling the space with words.
- Observe deep confidentiality. Trust comes from knowing that group members honor confidences and take seriously the ethics of privacy and discretion.
- Know that it’s possible to leave the circle with whatever it was that you needed when you arrived. Know that the seeds planted here can keep growing in the days ahead.

This kind of community is not possible at work or where there is a threat to one’s security or livelihood. It has to be in groups where we commit to these practices without any strings attached.

I hope that this time in isolation will help us to cultivate new kinds of small communities we want to connect with. Knowing and experiencing our deep bond as a humanity during this time of pandemic can help us to be intentional about genuine community. I would like to end with words from Desmond Tutu who reflected on the Zulu proverb of Ubuntu which says that, “I am a person through other people. My humanity is tied to yours.” Archbishop Desmond Tutu explained it this way: “One of the sayings in our country is Ubuntu - the essence of being human. Ubuntu speaks particularly about the fact that you can’t exist as a human being in isolation. It speaks about our interconnectedness and we think of ourselves far too frequently as just individuals, separated from one another, whereas you are connected and what you do affects the whole world. When you do well, it spreads out; it is for the whole of humanity...We are made for goodness. We are made for love. We are made for friendliness. We are made for togetherness. We are made for all of the beautiful things that you and I know. We are made to tell the world that there are no outsiders... We all belong to this family, this human family, God’s family.” Amen.