Rev. Tiffania Icaza Willetts

Wesleyan Rooted Week 5: Serve Impactfully

Matthew 25:35-40

35 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, 36 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.’ 37 Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food or thirsty and gave you something to drink? 38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you or naked and gave you clothing? 39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ 40 And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.’

I would consider myself a musical theater person. When I was a little girl, my mom showed me all the musical classics: *The King and I, My Fair Lady, The Sound of Music*, just to name a few. In high school, I took a class trip to New York City and saw *Wicked* and *The Producers*. In college, I was only an hour train ride from New York City, so friends and I would take trips to see shows regularly. I’m not sure what it is I like so much about musicals, but I think it’s something about the drama and intensity of the actors on the stage. You might think you know what’s coming next, but then someone breaks out into song, or a large group starts to dance in perfect time, and you’re transported to that place with them.

One musical hit in recent years that I love is *Hamilton*. I imagine you’ve heard of it. I have been lucky enough to see the national tour twice. Even if you haven’t heard of it, *Hamilton* tells the story of Alexander Hamilton, one of the founding fathers of the United States of America. Hamilton was a lawyer, politician, and prolific writer. In addition to all this, Hamilton was a solider. In fact, he was one of the commanders of George Washington’s army at the Battle of Yorktown, the final, decisive victory of the American Revolutionaries against the British army, when the United States of America became its own country.

By conventional wisdom, the Revolutionaries had no chance. The British military was one of the worlds’ foremost fighting forces. But the Revolutionaries kept fighting to have the right to decide their own laws and ways to live, not subject to a king or Parliament across the ocean. And their drive and ingenuity gave them the victory.

When I think of the musical *Hamilton*, one song starts running through my head. “Yorktown” is the Act 1 finale, and it tells the story of the Battle of Yorktown through the eyes of Alexander Hamilton and his friends. A simple refrain runs through the whole song: “the world turned upside down.” That was rumored to be the song the British played as they retreated from Yorktown: “the world turned upside down.” The Americans had made the impossible possible. They started a country from a colony – the first time that had even happened. The world was turned upside down.

Today, our Scripture reading is a little bit upside-down. Jesus defies our expectations and calls us to a life of service which might make us uncomfortable. And through service, we experience salvation not as a one-time event but a lifelong pursuit.

I’ll admit, these verses are not easy for me to preach. Sure, the first part is nice, a reminder for us of how we should treat one another with love and service. But these verses are followed by a scene of eternal fire and punishment for those who do not serve with love.

Jesus says:

‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.'

Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’

Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” (Matthew 25:41-46)

I’m bringing up these verses about final judgment because we need the whole picture to really understand what Jesus is saying here. And no, the point is not to make us feel scared and guilty. The point is to emphasize just how essential loving and serving others is to the Christian life.

Let’s set the scene: Right before these verses, Jesus presents an image of sheep and goats. But the setting of the story is not a gentle pasture. It is judgment day. And Jesus says the Son of Man – referring to himself – will separate all people, as a shepherd separates sheep from goats. Now, pay attention – what are the criteria for someone to be considered a sheep or a goat? Is it whether they were baptized? Is it whether they said the “sinner’s prayer” and asked God to forgive them? Is it how many hours they prayed every day? No. Jesus says the criteria by which the king is judging the people before him is how they treated “the least of these.”

Now, this doesn’t mean that baptism, and asking God for forgiveness, and spiritual practices are unimportant. We do these things not out of ritual obligation, but because they mark us as forgiven and redeemed children of God which, in turn, motivates us to live a life of service. Through baptism, repentance (or asking God for forgiveness), and spiritual practices, we experience God’s love with us and the support of the community of faith. These rituals and practices help us to remember that we are part of something bigger than ourselves, that serving others is not only the right thing to do but that when we serve others, it is a holy act because we are serving God.[[1]](#footnote-2)

These verses are part of a larger teaching Jesus gives to his disciples on the last judgment, the second coming of Christ.[[2]](#footnote-3) They are right at the end of the book of Matthew, and they are the last teachings Jesus gives to his disciples before he is arrested, killed, and raised from the dead, all within the next few days. Because of this placement, we can see that this story is not only important, but is the essential outworking and application of Jesus’ teaching, which culminates in the law of love of everything Jesus has taught up to this point.

In that context, these verses are a reminder to the disciples and to us of what following Jesus really means. Following Jesus is more than being baptized, asking God for forgiveness, and growing in the spiritual life. Baptism, repentance, and spiritual practices are just the start. These verses show us the end.

In the end, we will not be judged on whether we said the right prayers or went to church every Sunday. We will be judged on our hearts’ truest attitudes, seen in our actions – how we treated the least of these. How we served others who have no way to give us anything in return.

When asked about the greatest commandment in Scripture, Jesus said, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matthew 22:37-40). He also showed us through his life on earth what it means to be a servant. The book of Philippians reminds us:

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death— even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:5-8)

Jesus’s life was one of service, and he calls his followers repeatedly to also live in service.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, also preached on these verses about the final judgment. And he wanted people to understand the role of service and good works in our lifelong journey of salvation. He wrote,

Good works are so far from being hindrances of our salvation; they are so far from being insignificant, from being of no account in Christianity; that, supposing them to spring from a right principle, they are the perfection of religion. They are the highest part of that spiritual building whereof Jesus Christ is the foundation… Of these our Lord himself says, “Hereby is my Father glorified, that ye bring forth much fruit.” Much *fruit*! Does not the very expression imply the excellency of what is so termed? Is not the tree itself for the sake of the fruit? By bearing fruit, and by this alone, it attains the highest perfection it is capable of, and answers the end for which it was planted. Who, what is he then, that is called a Christian, and can speak lightly of good works?[[3]](#footnote-4)

John Wesley wants us all to answer the question, how can you serve “the least of these”?

For over two hundred years, Methodists have been answering that question. Wesley himself started a school near Bristol, England, to serve the children of poor coal miners in their community, called the Kingswood School.[[4]](#footnote-5) He believed in the power of education to help those in poverty to aspire to a better future. This legacy has continued through many Methodist-related schools and universities around the world that support first generation college students. Methodists in the United States have started ministries to provide healthcare access and hospital services in communities that needed them. In Florida, our United Methodist Children’s Home has over one-hundred years of history caring for children who need a safe place to grow and thrive as beloved children of God.[[5]](#footnote-6) The United Methodist Committee on Relief “comes alongside those who suffer from natural or human-caused disasters – famine, hurricane, war, flood, fire or other events—to alleviate suffering and serve as a source of help and hope for the vulnerable.”[[6]](#footnote-7) Right here in Florida, we have experienced some of that support from UMCOR in the aftermath of major hurricanes that cross our state.

And beyond serving those who have experienced suffering, we can also understand these verses as a call to improve the systems in our society that promote suffering. While he founded Kingswood School as a way to directly serve those in need, John Wesley also wrote “Thoughts Upon Slavery” in 1774, where he denounced slavery as an unjustifiable practice, writing:

“If, therefore, you have any regard to justice, (to say nothing of mercy, nor the revealed law of God,) render unto all their due. Give liberty to whom liberty is due, that is, to every child of man, to every partaker of human nature… Be gentle toward all men; and see that you invariably do unto every one as you would he should do unto you.”[[7]](#footnote-8)

Today that statement might seem obvious, but in John Wesley’s day, advocating for the end of slavery was a controversial stance! And while our church does not have a perfect track record, when it comes to advocating for social change on behalf of the least of these, we recognize the importance of advocating for racial and social justice to the Christian life of service.

So, how will you serve the least of these? What is God calling you to do to make the world more like the upside-down kingdom of God, where salvation is based not on status but on receiving the grace and forgiveness of God which then perfects us into a life of service?

In the Bible, God uses ordinary people to change their communities. It’s not so different from the story of *Hamilton.* These “founding fathers” whom we revere were just men. The musical shares with us how they made poor choices and made mistakes along the way. But they could see a new world, a new way to govern, and they followed that passion and that vision to form our country.

Jesus calls us all to a life of service, using our gifts and talents to change the world for the better. But we must listen and humble ourselves, following the example of Jesus, to truly serve all those who God loves. When we do, we will experience salvation – not just as a pie in the sky experience after death but here and how when we help to make the world more like the kingdom of God as our service becomes the outworking of a life of love in which we are growing deeply in God’s grace. Amen.

1. Boring, *Matthew*, New Interpreter’s Bible, 455 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Luz, *Matthew*, Hermeneia Commentary, 179. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. John Wesley, “The Reward of the Righteous,” <https://www.resourceumc.org/en/content/sermon-99-the-reward-of-the-righteous> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. https://www.umc.org/en/content/ask-the-umc-what-was-the-first-school-started-by-methodists [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. https://www.fumch.org/about-fumch/history/ [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. https://umcmission.org/umcor/ [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. John Wesley, “Thoughts Upon Slavery,” https://msa.maryland.gov/megafile/msa/speccol/sc5300/sc5339/000091/000000/000001/restricted/2002\_09\_10/wesley/thoughtsuponslavery.html [↑](#footnote-ref-8)