

Pimping the Poor
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By Wayne J. Schneider - Soli Deo Gloria

"Pimping the Poor"
St. Matthew 25:31-40

Here's the story I tell about how I met the United Methodist Church. I had been kicked out of the conservative, sectarian church I had served for 22 years, with their teaching that being Christian mostly meant buying an insurance policy for the hereafter.

We were told not to concern ourselves with this world. We need not bother ourselves with the poor, the hungry, the stranger, unless of course in doing so we might sell them the eternal insurance policy thus adding a notch to our holiness belt.

See, as our hymns suggested, we were the spiritual 1%. We were all about gold streets and mansions in heaven, so the deteriorating sub-standard housing around the corner was not our concern.

After speaking with several United Methodists I soon learned there was a whole world of Christians out there who actually take St. Matthew chapter 25 seriously. Who believe that when we feed the hungry, cloth the naked, and care for the sick we do so to Jesus' own self.

The UMC, the denomination this congregation is a part of, even has this great slogan: *Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors*. And I believe that. No question. And most of you believe that too. The work many of you do serving the poor is informed by your Christian faith as well it should be. I heard from Dietrich Bonhoeffer that we are the only feet and hands that Christ has, so we are to be little Christs out in the world. And to a large extent this is true. God's Work, our hands ... absolutely. So I could preach a sermon about how actually giving a crap about the poor is part of following Jesus. But most of you already are on board with that.

And as tempting as it seems when we read a Gospel text like this to think, "Look! Even Jesus agrees with us!" we are probably missing something ... and we can so easily replace "*the conservative personal morality insurance plan for the hereafter checklist*" with a "*liberal social justice, here's what Christianity REALLY means*" checklist.

Either way we end up not really needing Jesus so much as needing to make sure we successfully complete the right list of tasks. Because in the end every form of "Checklist Christianity" leaves Jesus essentially idling in his van on the corner, while we say "*Thanks*

Jesus ... but we can take it from here"

So, while we as the people of God are certainly called to feed the hungry and cloth the naked, that whole Christian "*We're blessed to be a blessing*" thing, can be kinda dangerous.

It can be dangerous when it starts to feel like we are placing ourselves above the world, waiting to descend on those below so we can be the "blessing" they've been waiting for, like it or not. It can so easily become a well-meaning but insidious blend of benevolence and paternalism. It can so easily become "pimping the poor" so that we can feel like we are being good little Christs for them.

So this week I had these dangers in the back of my head as I read St. Matthew 25 a little closer, and I realized this: Jesus says "*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.*"

Which means ... Christ comes not in the form of those who feed the hungry but in the hungry being fed. Christ comes not in the form of those who visit the imprisoned, but in the imprisoned being cared for.

And to be clear, Christ does not come to us AS the poor and hungry. Because as anyone for whom the poor are not an abstraction but actual flesh and blood people knows ... the poor and hungry and imprisoned are not a romantic special class of Christ like people.

And those who meet their needs are not a romantic special class of Christ like people. We all are equally as sinful and saintly as the other. No, Christ comes to us IN the needs of the poor and hungry, needs that are met by another so that the gleaming redemption of God might be known. And we are all the needy and the ones who meet needs: Placing ourselves or anyone else in only one category or another is to tell ourselves the wrong story entirely.

I'm not a great example of this. I hate asking for help. Clearly not in terms of setting up chairs or baking bread for communion. I mean, if I am hurting or in pain it's like torture to admit it and even worse to humble myself to ask for help. It's as though I think that I am not deserving of the care I give others that, of course, is totally arrogant. So I wonder if this text is about how we withhold Christ from each other when we pretend we have no need. When we are only the ones being the blessing to others do we keep Christ from being revealed in our own needs that could be met by another?

Because I just don't think the economy of grace includes 2 separate classes of people,

one who hungers and one who offers food. Truth be told, we are all both sheep and goat. We are both bearers of the Gospel and receivers of it. We meet the needs of others and have our needs met.

And the strangeness of the Good News is that, like those who sat before the throne and said "*huh? When did we ever feed you Lord?*" we never know when it is that we touch Jesus in all of this. All that we have is a promise, a promise that your needs are holy to God. A Promise that Jesus is present in the meeting of needs and that his kingdom is here. And that he's a different kind of king who rules over a different kind of kingdom.

Because it looks more like being thirsty and having someone you don't even like give you water, more than it looks like polishing a crown. It looks like giving my three extra coats to the trinity of junkies on the corner, than it looks like ermine trimmed robes.

That is the surprising scandal of the Gospel; the astonishing scandal of the Kingdom: it looks like the same crappy mess that bumps us out of our unconscious addiction to being good, so that you can look at Jesus as he approaches you on the street and says, *man, You look like you could use a good meal. Alleluia. Amen*