



SAINT MARK'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*Christ the King St. Mark's November 26, 2017
Matthew Final Judgement, Great Surprise, Wellness Check*

My husband summarizes our life as we become older into four categories. “We go to church. We go out to eat. We go to funerals, and we go to the doctors. Indeed, we do spend an inordinate amount of time in physician offices where miracle workers try to put our bodies back together for a few more years so we might see graduations and marriages of our grandchildren. We concentrate on **wellness**, disease prevention. We are vigilant about signs of cancer, for we know early diagnosis is crucial. Heart disease is a worry. My husband has had his bypass. My primary care physician treats me as if at my age I already have heart disease. We know the best treatment for our heart. Diet and exercise. The proper diet is easier, but exercise is more difficult with my mobility issues. One daughter-in-law suggests yoga and another daughter-in-law and our granddaughter are “fixing” as they say in Arkansas to do yoga here at St. Mark’s. Mine will no doubt be chair yoga. Also, you may see some of the staff wearing a Fitbit to measure steps. This is an attempt of Michael McCain to keep us alive a little longer.

This passage from Matthew is called the **Last Judgement**, but could have several other titles. One is **the Great Surprise**. Those who are caring for those in need as well as those who are not have no realization that they are also caring for Christ as well. Another title is **The Great Wellness Check for ourselves and for those in need**.¹ How interesting that the six ways Jesus gives for recognizing God in the world all deal with caring for the bodies, the humanity, the wellness of others. Jesus doesn't ask how many souls we have saved, what **creeds** we believe, but asks if we have cared for the basic human needs and **wellness** of others. Jesus makes it clear that what happens to others, happens to him. He takes it personally. He tells us that his body will be present in those in need and especially those who are suffering, the untreated hypertensive and the mentally ill who visit St. Mark's food pantry and St. Francis House. **Remember this**. Our King is not a remote God up in the sky on some throne. He is right here, right here, especially in our neighbor who needs us.

Jesus reminds us how important it is for our souls to practice unrestrained hospitality and love towards each other, especially those who are sick, needy, poor, the stranger, those in prison, especially for the "least of these, who are members of my family," says the King. This is the diaconal call and invitation of the church to **all** of us. Jesus is giving us at the end of this liturgical year a snapshot of what our overall **wellness** should look like as well as the wellness of **those in need**.

Matthew wants us to know that our ministry to those in the margins of our society is a diagnostic tool for us to measure and evaluate the condition of **our own** hearts. This ministry should not be a check off of a to do list, but a call to care because of the love which God has placed in our hearts. How easy it is to forget how to nurture this love and put it into action. Remember how quickly the disciples (Acts 24:10-14) forget in the immediate post-resurrection stories when the first women at the tomb are not believed and are dismissed by the disciples. Remember the discouragement of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Just one day after the resurrection, we see some of the most dangerous cancers Christians face, apathy, antagonism, disagreement, and a cooling of that love we once felt for Christ and each other. We forget we can only keep that love by giving it away as we look for the face of Christ daily in those climbing the corporate ladder as well as those in hospitals and nursing homes, those who are hungry, immigrants, and those who have lost their homes from fire, flood, or hurricane.

As in all of Jesus's commands, it is a paradox. When we reach out to others in need, the love we share comes back to us and revitalizes, reenergizes us. Henri Nouwen describes it more clearly.² "Like every human organization, the Church is constantly in danger of corruption. The answer *to prevent it* is clear: by focusing on the poor. The poor make the Church faithful to its vocation. When the Church is no longer a church for the poor, it loses its spiritual identity *and* gets caught up in

disagreements, jealousy, power games, and pettiness. When we reach out with all our energy to the margins of our society we will discover that petty disagreements, fruitless debates, and paralyzing rivalries will gradually vanish.”

At the beginning of this month we celebrated the lives of saints and mentors who made a difference in our lives. They are a constant reminder of what **wellness** is like.

Last month we remembered someone who all in the recovery community in Little Rock knew well, Columbus. Every year, usually early in the morning on the birthday of your sobriety, you got a phone call from Columbus. You waited in anticipation for that call, celebrating one more year of new life with someone you only knew over the phone lines.

Columbus’ wife of 46 years left him three times before he went into his last rehabilitation after multiple DUI’s, missed work, and days when she did not know where he was. Columbus died in the 38th year of his sobriety and was credited with leading thousands of men and women all over the world to sobriety. Columbus made 15,000 calls a year and almost half a million calls before his death. He also called people he knew were no longer in recovery and told them he cared about them. Many say they returned to recovery because of Columbus.

Columbus' wife described his change as "truly unbelievable. He became a dedicated father and grandfather after he came so close to losing his family."

When I hear people wonder **what** they can possibly do to make a difference in the world, I tell them Columbus' story. One man with a generous **heart**, picking up the phone every day, and changing lives with a simple phone call.

I know each of us can remember times we did not get a good wellness report and passed by the body of Christ. As we met for our family's last Thanksgiving meal last night, we looked at old family vacation slides. I remember the first time we took our oldest son to New York when he was in high school. We were so excited to show him all of our favorite haunts in the Big Apple. Of course, his favorite part of the trip was dining from room service in our hotel room. When we did venture out to the crowded streets, I do not remember his amazement at seeing the cacophony of people or the towering skyscrapers. I do remember that shortly after we left our hotel, we were met with people, men, women, young, old sitting in alleys and by storefronts with cardboard signs begging for food and money. Of course, my husband and I walked right by. But our son, walked by with us, then stopped, and turned around and went back to give money to each person begging. Consciously or unconsciously, our son had seen the body of Christ in each of the street

people he met that day. Isn't it amazing what your children can teach you.

Barbara Brown Taylor³ reminds us that “sometimes when we do look into the eyes of those in need, all we see is our own helplessness, our own inability to know what is right. Sometimes we will see our own reflection; we see ourselves in a stark new light. Sometimes we see such gratitude that it reminds us how much we have to be thankful for, and sometimes we see such a wily will to survive that we cannot help but admire it, even when we are the target of its ambitions.”

One more thing to remember. Notice that the sheep and the goats do not respond individually, but as a group. We are part of a **community**, the body of Christ, and the **wellness** of this body and our own depends on our serving together. My experience is that my body becomes exhausted and overwhelmed when I begin to believe that I alone am in charge of caring for the needs of the world. GOD DOES NOT WORK ALONE, so why would we think that God would ask us to serve without the help of the rest of the body of Christ?

Wellness checks are not our favorite things. They ask us to look at our lives and recalibrate. They remind us that infection, cancer, and heart disease are what we need to be on the lookout for in our own **spirit** as well as our **bodies**. Jesus reminds us today what a **wellness check-up** for Christians is like. I have asked you to remember many things. If you forget, remember **one thing**. Christianity's default position should

always be **hospitality**,⁴ especially to the stranger. This is Jesus' favorite medical advice for our hearts, to reach out and **love** is to stay **alive** and be **well**.⁵

1Lindsay Armstrong, *Feasting on the Word, year A Vol 4*, pp. 333-337.

2Henri Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey*.

3Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, "Knowing Glances," pp. 133-139.

4Will Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, vol. 45, no. 4 year A, November 2017, pp. 27-29.

5John Buchanan, *Feasting on the Word, year A Vol 4*, pp. 332-336.