

“IMPROV CHURCH”
A Sermon Preached at
FIRST UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
Belleville, IL
By The Rev. Rob Dyer
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(transcribed from audio file)

Micah 6:8

*He has told you, O mortal, what is good,
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice and to love kindness
and to walk humbly with your God? NRSVue*

1 Peter 4:8-10

Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaining. Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. NRSVue

Matthew 25:31-46

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, for 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, 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.’ 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? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ 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.' Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You who 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.' *NRSVue*

Philippians 4:6-9

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about^[a] these things. As for the things that you have learned and received and heard and noticed in me, do them, and the God of peace will be with you. *NRSVue*

I need a word that has meaning to you. A single word.

Faithfulness

Integrity

Now I need a chore or a thing that you really don't like doing.

Laundry

All right. I'll take laundry. Those are words my wife has never heard me say.

Hopefully today we have experienced some things that weren't expected. Hopefully today we heard something a little differently than what we were thinking we would

hear. But one of things that I love about this church is that you're always willing to try something at least once and that we find a way to worship God together.

So, we have these passages and faithfulness and integrity and laundry. This year I'm celebrating 30 years of marriage to my wonderful wife, Sarah. I am a well-trained husband, and I know how to make points in the Dyer household. Now there are things I take care of that she never wants to think about or take care of, right?

So, if she comes home and catches me like I'm on the computer, taking care of paying all of our bills and managing all the finance stuff, while I know it is appreciated it doesn't get a big response. But if she comes home and finds me doing laundry...Whooo! I'll tell you what! That lasts for a week cause it's just one of those things that I don't know exactly why it is, but man if I just like get caught doing laundry, that is a big win.

I think part of it is that over the years we've divided things up and laundry has been more of her thing and so I think part of it is that I'm taking one of her things – one of her tasks. So that's part of it.

The other thing is that she sees me for the broken creature that I am, and I am just not a person who sees the need to do laundry. It's not that I see it and I go, I'm just not going to do it. I mean there could be a huge pile in our bathroom where the hamper is bursting at the seams and there is even an extra pile on top of the hamper. I'm sure none of you can relate to this. That pile could even spill on to the floor in the bathroom and still it doesn't occur to me, huh I should do laundry.

Do you know when it occurs to me that I need to do laundry? It's the day you open up the underwear drawer and there is nothing in it. That's when Rob goes "Hey, I ought to get some laundry done."

The tasks we are given in our relationship, the way we share the load, it makes the relationship work. It signifies respect. It signifies love. It signifies a kind of partnership and so, when we think about our connection with God, what's our duty list there? What's our chore list? What are the things we are supposed to be doing?

Here's what I love about you all. This is so First United-ish of you. You all picked passages about the importance of us loving and serving and caring for others. Each one of these valued this in different ways.

You picked out Micah 6:8 which is the prophet's way of saying, "look dum dum, this is what you're supposed to do. What does the Lord require of you? I'll tell you.

Do justice. Love kindness and don't get so full of yourself. You need to walk humbly with your God, to be in partnership with God."

If we simply did justice and loved kindness and managed a little humility through the whole thing, that'd be a good one. It's a good summary, but you kept going and you picked other passages.

1 Peter 4: which talks about this deep love that we are called to have for one another and to share what we have with others in need. You know what I thought about when I heard that passage? I thought about Needs Among Us.

I thought about the idea that people can come here and present the needs that they have and then in this program that we have we share those needs with the congregation and then you all help one another. Those of you who are wondering, why are all those piles of stuff out in the hallway out there. It's not cause we're a messy church. Well, we are, but that's not why that's there. That's there because those are the items that have been brought in to help the families that requested help through our Needs Among Us program.

And what is beautiful is, not only is it all those physical items that are brought, but some people are going, and they are doing tasks, and they are helping out people. They are forming those personal relationships.

Many of you gave funds to help support because you heard that there were families that were in danger of losing their housing. You heard that there were families that were in danger of having their utilities shut off and I want to tell you some really good news from that. Because of your generosity with Needs Among Us this last round, there are 7 families that avoided losing their utilities this month. Actually, some of them had already lost it, but because of your generosity we were able to get it turned back on again. One family had not had electricity since May. And then there were 3 families that you kept in their homes that were endanger of getting evicted out of their homes and your generosity kept them in their home. Thanks be to God. Right?

That's 1 Peter 4. That's it. This is what we do around here. It's what we are meant to do in our faith.

I think sometimes we think a little bit... this Matthew 25 passage, it's got 2 aspects to it that I think touch upon what we are talking about here. Like on the one hand it talks about what does the Lord want of us. It's like, look you're supposed to cloth those who need clothing. You're supposed to help those who need help. It goes

through this whole list, you know? When was I thirsty and you gave me something to drink? Whenever you did it for any of the least of you, you did it for me. God is saying, look, what I need from you is to help one another. I don't need your worship, just to come this direction, (points inward). I need your worship to go this direction. (points outward). To care for one another and to love one another.

The second aspect of Matthew 25 though that we sometimes get caught up on is the whole, and the ones who did it are on the good side, and the ones who didn't are on the bad side and it begs the question, which side do you want to be on?

It holds this possible punishment for not loving as we're called to love over us in this passage and there is a tension there because on the one hand it's great to be called into acts of love and mercy and grace, but it's a little scary this idea that there is a justice in it and that God pays attention.

I think one of the things that this passage really says is that, look your faith is meant to have integrity. Your faith is meant to have integrity. It's meant to be more than words. It's got to turn into some kind of action and if you read your entire Bible, it's not just a matter of, well I'm gonna do those things cause I don't want to go to Hell. You know?

But what you find out is that your God sees the situation, knows there is an opportunity for judgment and meets you with grace and forgiveness because you're gonna mess it up over and over again and you are gonna be people who are left suffering because we can't seem to pull it together. And there is so much brokenness in this world, so that inability to love the way we are called to love is met by God's faithfulness and that's the other word you lifted up.

It's not our faithfulness that becomes the big story of our relationship with God; it's God's faithfulness in forgiving us again and again and again. In return God is asking for a little integrity. Don't make a mockery out of this faith. Don't make a mockery out of the gift of grace I have given you. When people hear of a Christian, I don't want them to think of a mean, antagonistic, judgmental, overbearing person. And humanity's response is "Well how about we just try this for a few millennium? because too often that's where we line up. We want to be on the judgment seat and say, "you're on the right. You're on the left. You are the blessed and you are the damned". And that seat was never meant for any one of us to sit upon. Because from that seat comes a mercy that you can't come up with; a grace that you can't manage; a forgiveness that may not even make sense to you.

In the Philippians passage it says that we should really leave things to God and the peace that surpasses your understanding, the grace that surpasses your understanding, the mercy, the love. When it says the peace of God, it's all that together because the peace of God is all that love, the mercy, the grace, that forgiveness. It is so great and wonderful, it will surpass your understanding.

Then it says, so listen my dear friends in Christ, whatever is good, whatever is noble, do that. Do that to one another.

This is the chore that is given to you. It's not a long list. It's to have some integrity of faith so that it becomes more than words. It becomes actions. It becomes acts of mercy and grace that are so radical and so big that it makes a community wonder what's going on inside that family of faith, what's going on over there. I think I might want to be a part of that because I'd like to be part of love and mercy and grace and beauty in this world. I may not even be sure about faith. I may not even be sure about who Jesus is and who God is, but what I do know is that inside that building that claims to follow that God and claims to be disciples of Jesus, that when I look at what's coming out of the people of that building, I want to be a part of that. I want to be part of whatever that is because that has integrity. That means something and maybe at that point when they find out the why behind it, when they find out what we know about our God who loves us that much. Well maybe they'd be willing to pick up one of those chores and maybe they'd find themselves drawn into that relationship that doesn't depend upon the doing of those chores, but it depends upon simply the love of one who has called us into this beautiful work that we get to do together.

It is so beautiful and wonderful to see us try to take good care of one another. It is so beautiful and wonderful to see us try to love on those 50 families from Brite Point. It is so beautiful and wonderful to be part of a family of faith that believes that love is the primary work that we are to be about and that judging is something we ought to leave to the Almighty. That seems like the kind of God that I grew up learning about. That seems like the kind of God who forgave me. That seems like the kind of God who loved me first. That sounds like the kind of faith that I'd like to be a part of.

To God be the glory.

Halleluiah and Amen.