

November 26, 2017 Calloused Hands Matthew 25:31-33

I stumbled across this quotation from a minister by the name of Dr. Alan Redpath. “Beware of the barrenness of a busy life.” There can be no question that at times the sheer pace of life, a very full daily, weekly, even monthly calendar can rob us of the vitality that is part of life lived in Christ...our spirituality. Surely it is that very danger which gave rise to and inspiration for the teaching in a hymn like “Take Time To Be Holy.” That hymn reminds us that if we undervalue time spent in prayer and spent reading the Scriptures, we shall find it difficult to be like Jesus. We will be tempted to blend in with the balance of our world, and secular society.

When I was a young man just emerging from my teens, but aware that God had called me to ministry, I spent a summer in Cobourg. The reason I was there was to study New Testament Greek under the Rev. Jim Jack who was the minister of St. Andrew’s Cobourg and the teacher of New Testament Greek at Knox College. A teacher at one of the High Schools in Cobourg led the Young People’s Group. He took us to an evening service at Knox Presbyterian Church on Spadina Ave. where I heard and met the late Dr. William Fitch who is quoted as saying this: “Any point of defective obedience to Jesus, constitutes total disobedience.” You see the problem with defective obedience is we try to justify our little slip in that area....there were reasons, circumstances that made our defective obedience rational. Dr. Fitch’s point is basic. We are

justified by faith in Jesus alone. That means a “slip-up” in terms of obedience...is disobedience, is sin. And we are often guilty.

It is true. The pursuit of holiness, or faithfulness to Jesus is important. It is important to pray and spend time with the Lord, to read the Scriptures, to seek the presence the guidance and the shaping of our lives that comes of the presence of the Holy Spirit. But it is also true that it is important to be active about our faith. To be doing the work to which God leads us, to be active in the mission of the church....which almost always should lead us to spend time with people, who need our love, our encouragement, our practical, sensible help.

I was surprised by an insight that came to me, and came only because I was diagnosed with cancer in 2015, and had to go through surgery, and subsequently radiation treatment in 2016. I would never have chosen either one of those treatments, or the diagnosis that led to them. However, in preparation for the courses of treatment of my illness a number of tests were required including soft tissue scans, and skeletal scans. I was not surprised to learn that the cancer was localized in one spot. I did not feel sick. I was surprised to learn that I had arthritis in my right hip and shoulder. I had not been aware of any pain. I was further surprised by my surgeon's comment.... “I would expect these findings of someone who has worked all his life.” If we work, we get callouses on our hands, and there is wear and tear on our joints. Faith in Jesus should lead to both.

In Matthew 25 beginning at verse 31 Jesus describes the gathering which will occur as part of the HIS second coming. All the nations will be gathered before the Son of Man who Jesus is. There will be an accounting for what we have done. The separation of the sheep from the goats. The sheep on HIS right, the goats on HIS left. The King...Jesus is the King of Kings, will issue an invitation. The sheep will be invited to receive their inheritance, a gift which has awaited them from the beginning of time. I am amazed at the reason Jesus gives for their receiving that reward. It all has to do with activity. It all has to do with doing work. It all has to do with service that has been rendered.

On the surface of things it does not even seem to have been work, activity, service rendered unto God. "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you invited me in. I needed clothes and you clothed me. I was sick and you looked after me. I was in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous (notice this: Jesus calls them the righteous....people who did the right thing) they answer this proclamation with a question....there must be a mistake. When did we ever feed you, give you a cup of water, share ourselves in fellowship with you, clothe you, care for you, visit you?

It is very clear that they (the righteous as Jesus calls them) have no memory of doing these things with or for Jesus. And the answer that Jesus gives to their question which is

actually a series of questions is... “The truth is, whatever you did for the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.”

What? It sounds like the hours and years of praying do not count. It sounds like the hours and years of Bible reading and Bible study are not even considered. It sounds like these sermons which I slave over and to which you give such attention and concentration are not all that important. My Master of Divinity doesn't appear on the list. My Doctorate from Fuller is not on the list. It would appear that it is more important to have calloused hands, the outward signs of physical work, than all that attention to spiritual stuff... And of course that is not the case. Labouring to be close to God is important. Hearing God's voice is important. So prayer is important. And reading the Scriptures is important. Hearing and caring about sermons is important. Worshipping is important. Insofar as those things permit the Living God who has redeemed us in Jesus Christ to shape us, and mold us, to melt us and make us, more and more like HIS Son, Jesus.

But here is the bottom line. Jesus makes clear in Matthew 25 that HE cares about results. The redeemed ought to be weary, sweaty. The redeemed ought to have dirty hands. And they ought to have calloused hands. The world around them should be different, for their having lived in that part of the world. The hungry should have been fed by them. The naked should have been clothed by them. The thirsty should have been saved by their offering a cup of water. The sick

should have been cared for by them. Those in prisons, some of their own making, ought to have not been left alone in their isolated boundness.

I do not want anyone to go home and say, “Well the minister really made us feel guilty this morning,” unless you really deserve to feel guilty. I want you to remember these things. If you gave a sandwich to someone who was hungry....including those whom we have ministered to after funeral services, or worship services. If you bought someone a cup of coffee, or made it and shared it with someone who needed that kind of attention. If you worked at the rummage sale, or knitted mitts and hats and prayer shawls, and stuff to be shared with needy folks...wherever they were...or helped pay for wool, or the shipping of bags of goods to the orphanage in Kenya. Or cared for someone who was sick, or sick and dying. Or visited them or sat with them because they needed to be in company. Or made the grieving smile, for a moment, or even laugh. Or if you did time with people who were weeping because they were wounded and hurt.

You see here is the bottom line according to Jesus: if your having been HIS has put you in the position to do anything for others, your faith was doing what your faith in HIM is supposed to do. If you are weary from “church work” and worn from having lent your hands or your shoulder for someone to cry on...you have been building callouses on your hands. Faith without works is dead. Faith that leads to work

being done....is faith alive. Jesus said, thank you. If you did it for them wearing my brand, you may not have known it, but you were doing it to me, and for me. God loves servants who are weary from serving others. Callouses on their hands.

Let us pray;

Lord sometimes your word makes us scared that we haven't done enough, or that we did too much of the wrong stuff, in the wrong places, at the wrong time. Thank you for saving our lives. Thank you for making use of our lives, our efforts, and privileging us to touch the lives of others in your name. Thank you for the weariness of our bodies. Thank you for the sweat equity you have allowed us to have in your kingdom. Continue to make use of us until you come, or you take us home. In Jesus name we pray. Amen