**“Of Course it Matters!” Tim Webb July 14, 2024**

When I was a little kid, we played the game “Clue” quite a bit. Remember Clue? Well, I played the game for several years before I learned that it was not Professor Plum, in the dining room, with a LEAD (leed) pipe. My cousin, with eyes rolling, finally broke the news to me that it was with a LEAD (led) pipe. What did I know?! I was a kid, not a plumber!

**Words matter, and our understanding of words matters.**

Broadway Tire, right up the street on Warwick Ave, had a big sign out front earlier this year that said “Huge Tire Sale!” I often wondered if anyone ventured in and asked them when they would put regular size tires on sale, because they didn’t need huge tires.

**Words matter, and how we understand them matters.**

Today I want to talk about some words I heard spoken many years ago, which baffled me and frankly upset me at the time.

It was in the early 70’s, at Aldersgate United Methodist in York, Pennsylvania where I attended Sunday service virtually every week with my parents. I was probably in 8th, maybe 9th grade, I guess. The pastor was Grantis Hoopert. Now keep in mind, at that age my mind would wander as most teenagers’ minds would. As adults, we would never allow that to occur! But I happened to be focused on the sermon at the exact moment Reverand Hoopert said, “It doesn’t matter if we do good deeds. It doesn’t matter if we give to charity.” Without mentally sticking around to try to understand what he was talking about, my mind started to race. Wait just a minute, Pastor. (Today the young people say “Wait—what?”) Do you mean to tell me all those Sunday School teachers and Scoutmasters had it wrong when they told us to be kind to our neighbors, serve the poor, and help elderly ladies cross the street? That’s preposterous! So I zoned out the rest of the sermon, partly in protest I suppose. **Words matter, and our understanding of words matters.**

Friends, we are not going to break any new theological ground this morning, sorry to say. What I say, you already know. But from time-to-time we can lose a little perspective- at least I do- and a refresher is often helpful.

This morning’s little refresher comes in three parts.

First, and you surely don’t need a refresher on this point, Jesus clearly calls us to help our neighbor, to feed and clothe the poor. The scripture that Marian read this morning says it directly and even demonstrates that Jesus takes our actions, or lack thereof, quite personally. “*Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.*”

The Parable of the Bags of Gold, another part of Matthew 25 that Marian read from, makes it clear. You’ll remember that in the Parable, the rich man entrusted three servants each with a bag of gold to keep while he traveled. One servant was given a bag with 5 talents, a talent being a denomination of great value; another was given 2 talents, and a third servant was given a bag with 1 talent in it. When the rich man returned much later, the servants with 5 talents and 2 talents had invested them, and they were able to return to the rich man twice the value that they started with. Pretty good! Better than a 5 percent CD even! The third, who was given 1 talent, didn’t use the coin in a way that would multiply its value, but just buried it in the ground until the rich man returned. The inference is that he was either lazy or indifferent. He didn’t try. The rich man praised the first two for their good work and promised them even greater responsibility in the future. But he sent the third servant away because he failed to effectively use what he was given. Jesus’ message was simply that we must use the blessings God has given us, no matter the extent of them, or the nature of them, in ways that benefit the less fortunate, which multiplies the value of those blessings substantially. So again, it’s clear that Jesus wants us to share our blessings, our talents and resources, to do good deeds.

The second refresher this morning is this: Salvation isn’t granted by God on the basis of our good deeds. There’s no leader board like exists in the golf tournament this weekend. There’s no box score as in the Red Sox game. Rather, salvation is a gift of mercy given by God based on our faith: our accepting Christ- a transformation of our heart- a rebirth- a renewal- whatever you want to call it- and our faith is what compels us to do good deeds! It’s classic cause and effect! Paul’s Epistle to Titus says it all in Chapter 3 verse 5.

***Paul says, “He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the cleansing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit…”***

Again, in Matthew 25, Jesus uses another Parable to teach his disciples this through metaphor, on the Mount of Olives. In the Parable of the Sheep and Goats, Jesus describes how, when he returns as King and Judge, the people will be separated into two groups. The sheep have been transformed. They have accepted Christ in their hearts.

Those people, who truly believe and accept God's gift, will naturally live a life that reflects that transformation—that cleansing-- reaching out to help others. Their actions are a result of their faith, not a way to earn salvation. They will be saved because of their faith. But the goats lack the faith—they have not accepted the gift of God’s mercy, and therefore are not compelled by faith to help others. Their fate is damnation.

The third point this morning is that there are other effects- byproducts- of our charity toward others. Bishop Peggy Johnson made this point at Annual Conference last month, and it resonated with me, and in fact drove me to think about this subject in new ways. Bishop Johnson said- and I paraphrase liberally- that 1) our good works bring us ever closer to God, even when we’ve already been cleansed and have great faith, AND more importantly, 2) others will see our good works which, in fact, can spark something in their soul that ultimately can lead to THEIR salvation. Think about the hymn: “And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love, yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love.” How cool is that? That the demonstration of our faith by our actions can bring others who see it closer to God as well!

At Conference, Joy Mueller showed us a number of PowerPoint slides she had created based on a pre-Conference survey sent to each of the 500 plus churches in the New England Conference. One of the survey questions was an ask for each church to name one local mission or outreach that was particularly impactful. She showed us some of the responses. They were amazing in their variety, and they were largely based on a need that was particularly important in each church’s community. There was a connection between the most serious need in their community and the most impactful mission the church embarked upon. From being a source of Narcan to save overdose victims, to being a vehicle to bring unity and understanding to a community torn by racial or ethnic divisions, to feeding people, to clothing people, to spending time and sharing love with lonely people. The divinely inspired variety of local missions was really something remarkable to hear about.

Our church, small but mighty, is committed to local missions as evidenced by any number of good works this congregation has driven and continues to drive. Think about our announcements nearly every week. We have planted many seeds, whether we see the fruits or not. We are sharing the message in many ways, and people receive the message. That is a function of the strong faith of this church and its people, and that faith naturally results in doing good works for others.

Now what about Grantis Hoopert and his comments that were so disturbing to an 8th grader many years ago? Well, perhaps we would have said it a bit differently, but Reverand Hoopert was merely stating what we have said this morning: that our charitable acts don’t lead to salvation. It doesn’t matter what we do or don’t do, if we don’t accept Christ in our hearts. But if we truly have faith, our faith will lead us to live our lives with service to others as a natural outcome, and our good works to others are in fact, to Jesus Christ, works unto Him as well. May it be so, friends. Amen.