

*Upside Down and Backwards*

Matthew 25:31-40

One of the turning points in my life—one of those moments that I think of almost as a conversion—came at a memorial service that I attended while I was still practicing law. I didn't have any official role in that service; I wasn't even a churchgoer at that point in my life. I didn't really think of the person who had died as a friend, but he was someone who had been on the other side of several cases I'd worked on as a lawyer.

His name was Rick Renton—and he lived in the small Eastbay town of Moraga, which just happened to be the town I grew up in. His office was in Oakland, just like mine was. We'd recently had a big construction case together, and what I thought about Rick most from my experience with him was that he wasn't a particularly great lawyer. He was OK, but he was a plodder, the kind of lawyer whose value to his client seemed like his willingness to slog through thousands of documents for some telling bit of evidence. I never knew him to make any particularly insightful legal arguments, or to do a brilliant cross-examination. In a competitive business, and at a competitive time in my life, being one of the best lawyers around was very important to me. And so, I was not very impressed with Rick Renton. .

Rick died young, in the crash of a private airplane, a plane he was flying to a court hearing in the very northern part of California. At the memorial service at his church, there were a lot—maybe a couple of hundred--lawyers who knew Rick. His partners and family and friends spoke. And here's what I noticed, while I was at that service: No one said one thing about what kind of a lawyer Rick Renton was. What they talked about was what he loved to do when he wasn't working, and how he made other people feel about themselves, and what kind of a father he was.

And here's the story that made the biggest impact on me. One of Rick's law partners told it. He said that one November morning, the day after election day, he was reading the local newspaper in Moraga, where he also lived. To his surprise, he saw Rick Renton's name in the election results. Rick had run for City Council, and had lost. Lost badly. When this guy went to work that day, he saw Rick and he said, "Why didn't you tell your partners in the law firm that you were running for public office? We would have come out and helped you—we could have given you at least a better chance at winning!" And Rick said to him, "I wasn't running to win. I was running so that every weekend I could take my 9-year-old son out with me to knock on doors and introduce myself to our neighbors as a candidate for City Council. I wanted my son to know that he lives in a country where anyone can do that."

I was blown away by that story, knocked off my feet by the fact that while I was worrying about winning cases I can't even remember now, Rick was out there doing something important with his life, something that had nothing to do with what I thought of as success—but something important, valuable, life-giving. In some way that I'm not

sure even now I could fully articulate, Rick's story became a sort of gospel story to me—a story that wasn't directed at me at all, but that pointed back to my life. A story with the power to turn me upside down for a moment, so I could see the world—and myself—in a different way than I'd been able to before.

Jesus was a master at telling stories like that. It's what his stories still can do, if we can get past that sort of numbness that comes with having heard them many times before.

The passage we heard this morning from the Gospel of Matthew is one of those stories. Its placement in Matthew's book is important; it's the very last thing before Matthew takes the turn into telling us about Jesus' trial and death and resurrection. So it's like Matthew is saying to his readers, "If you forget everything else, remember this one." And Jesus couched his words with the same gravity. When everything else is finished, Jesus said, when the last word is written on life; when there is finally a judgment about who has chosen to live in God's way and who has not; when you're done arguing about what's the right belief for getting into heaven and what's not; here's what will matter. The people who *I know* have chosen to live out eternity with me are the ones who gave me food when I was hungry; who gave me a drink when I was thirsty; who welcomed me when I was a stranger. They gave me clothes when I was naked, took care of me when I was sick. They didn't forget me when I was in the hospital; they stayed with me, even when I was in *prison*.

Jesus must have known how startling this was for people to hear, because he just continued on. "I know," he said; "you're saying, 'Wait a minute. We never saw you hungry or thirsty or naked. I'm sure you were probably sick sometime, but I wasn't even there. And sure as heck you weren't ever in *jail*. People like you don't go to jail.'" He went right on. "Every time you did it to someone else—someone who was overlooked or ignored, someone you didn't recognize as anyone important—you did it to me."

Maybe you've heard that story so many times that it doesn't surprise you. But listen to what it's really saying. Serving someone else *is* serving God. Giving something to another person who needs something, whether it's by handing them a plate of food, or taking their temperature when they're sick, or comforting them when they're worried. Showing up for someone who is hard to be with, stuck in a prison of depression or pessimism or stubborn unhealthy behavior. Each of those things, is, all by itself, an interaction—a touching—with God.

You don't rise up into a spiritual state, out of your everyday life where you're bumping elbows with other people, Jesus was saying. You don't lift yourself out of messy situations to find meaning in your life. You go *down*, right into them. Always, Jesus said, you find God in the humblest, most basic needs; in the responsibilities that seemed like they were only weighing you down; in opportunities to do something small to make *this* life a little easier for someone else.

Do you want to find God? *That's* how you do it. You don't wait for a different life that has God in it; you see that *this* life is full of opportunities to touch holiness...in that

person right in front of you. It's not complicated; it's just different from what you thought. So different, it just might turn the way you see the world up-side down and backwards. It's supposed to.

Earlier in his teaching life, Jesus had said something similar. Some devout religious people came to him and asked, "What is the greatest commandment?" Now, we're so used to thinking about the Ten Commandments as rules for civil society, that we can miss the import of that question. But for Jews, there were not just ten commandments; there were hundreds. Following those commandments was what got you closer to God; you *approached* God by doing what the commandments said. So when they asked, "What's the greatest commandment?" they were really asking, "What's the thing we can do that matters most to God?"

Jesus answered first as they expected him to—with the mantra they had heard all their lives, recited in church every week: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul." They thought he would stop there. "Yeah, yeah," they would have thought—just like we would. And they would go away and attend to their prayers and sacrifices, just as they always had. But Jesus didn't stop there. "And there's another commandment," he said; "just as important as that one. You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

We've heard those two commandments paired for so long, that it's hard for us to capture what a shocking thing it must have been for the Pharisees—the faithful Jews—to hear Jesus say this. They had always thought that pleasing God—what we might think of as getting us to heaven—meant removing yourself from the rabble of everyday things, attending to matters of the Temple, devoting yourself to prayer and sacred readings. You know, the things God thinks about.

Nope, Jesus said. Loving other people, in the same every-moment, every-place ways you take care of yourself—that is just as important to God as directing your attention to religious practice. Maybe God is best loved indirectly, sideways—honored when we're in the act of loving God's people. Maybe those two commandments are actually one commandment. Maybe Jesus was saying: The way you love God is to love God's creation.

It took me many more years, and several more turning points in my life, before I realized that what that moment in Rick Renton's funeral stirred in me was my longing for an experience of God. I think now that sometimes—often, even—our need to do something for someone else, to be in service, or to do something we think of as meaningful work, is in fact *the same thing* as our need for an experience of God.

We need both those things: to serve others, to experience God. The difference is that we are culturally encouraged to do volunteer work; but sometimes people in our lives get uncomfortable if we go around talking about wanting to see Jesus. Nonetheless, I think we have this persistent yearning that drives us toward this truth—that we find God when we go out of our way to serve other people.

You know this already. Every year we hear from our youth at the end of the summer, when they talk about their mission experience as the time when they felt closest to God, or “got” something about God in a way they had never internalized in years of Sunday School.

Sometimes we think that what is asked of us is something heroic or world-changing, or at least away from home. But maybe Jesus was saying that the work of small things is even more important. It takes humility to make a commitment to keep carrying water and bread, or to keep pouring energy into something where our efforts might never be visible, or even noticed. To keep loving a person who might not change the way we would hope for them.

Maybe it’s the act itself—however small--that opens a space for God’s presence in the world, or at least in us. Maybe Jesus had us in mind when he said, “When you did it for someone else, you did it for me.”