

# God loves you, and so do we: a welcoming, caring church

Message for Sunday, April 2, 2017  
by Bruce Fraser

**Scripture:** Matthew 25:35-40 and others

**Children's message:** Matthew 20:25-28

In his book, *Conspiracy of Kindness*, Steve Sjogren tells the story of Joe Delaney and his eight-year-old son, Jared. As they were pitching a baseball in the backyard, Jared asked his dad, "Dad, is there a God?"

Joe responded, "I'm not really qualified to answer that question, son. I only went to church a time or two when I was a kid." After a few more tosses of the ball, Jared ran into the house. When he came out, he had a helium balloon from the circus and an index card.

"What are you doing?" Joe asked. "I'm writing a letter to God." In his eight-year old scrawl, the boy wrote, "Dear God, if you are real and if you are there, send people who know you to Dad and me." He attached the card to the balloon and released it.

Two days later, while Joe and Jared were shopping at the mall, they pulled into a car wash sponsored by a local church. Joe rolled down his window and asked, "How much?" "It's free," he was told. "We just want to show God's love in a practical way." Joe asked, "Are you guys Christian?" "Yeah, we're Christians." "Are you the kind of Christians who believe in God?" "Yes, we're that kind of Christians." Joe smiled and said, "I guess you're the answer to one of the strangest prayers God has ever received."

God used a local church's car wash, not only to answer a little boy's unusual prayer, but also eventually lead a whole family to faith in Christ.

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## 1) Where is God when it hurts?

Ask people for what questions they would like to ask God. There will be a variety.

Everyone wants to ask questions of God—more like *demand* answers: Why does God allow babies to be

born to parents who are chronic child abusers? Why does God allow warring armies to blanket villages and farms with land mines? Why does God allow cancer and strokes?

This parable in Matthew 25:31-46 that we just heard tells us clearly that Jesus is coming back, and that things will be set right. Sometimes people joke about the idea of a judgement after death. Make no mistake: there is a judgement day. All of us will have to give an account for what we did with our lives.

But what about the meantime? What about the days, the months — the centuries—while we wait? What about the evil and injustice in the world right now? Where is God when we need him? Where is God when it hurts?

The answer to that question is both profound and shocking. God has not abandoned us at all. Rather, he has taken on a disguise, the most unlikely disguise of the stranger, the poor, the hungry, the prisoner, the sick, the rejects of the world.

## 2) God calls us to care for people in need

In the parable of the sheep and the goats, the Lord returns to earth to judge the people. This is what he says to those who are blessed and enter into eternal life:

Matthew 25:35-40, New Living Translation:

"For I was hungry and you fed me. I was thirsty and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger and you invited me into your home. I was naked, and you gave me clothing. I was sick and you cared for me. I was in prison and you visited me."

Then these righteous ones will reply, "Lord, when did we ever see you hungry and feed you? Or thirsty and give you something to drink? Or a stranger and show you hospitality? Or naked and give you clothing? When did we ever see you sick or in prison, and visit you?"

And the King will tell them, "I assure you, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!"

A movie was on TV some years ago, starring the young Hayley Mills. She and two friends were playing in a barn and stumbled across a homeless stranger sleeping in the straw. "Who are you?" Mills asked in surprise. The tramp, even more surprised at being suddenly woke up, jerked his

head around, saw the children and muttered, “Jesus Christ!”

What he meant for swearing, the children took as the truth. They actually believed the man to be Jesus Christ. For the rest of the movie (*Whistle Down the Wind*), they treated the tramp with awe, respect and love. They brought him food and blankets, sat and talked with him, and told him about their lives. In time their tenderness transformed the tramp, who was an escaped convict who had never before known such caring.

The mother of Hayley Mills actually wrote the story, intending it as an allegory of what might happen if all of us took literally Jesus’ words about the poor and the needy. By serving them, we serve Jesus.

Mother Teresa was trying to explain to a rich American visitor who could not comprehend her total commitment to the dregs of Calcutta. She said, “We are a contemplative order. First we meditate on Jesus, and then we go out and look for him in disguise.”

If we cannot sense God’s presence in our lives, it may be that we have been looking in the wrong places!

### 3) God calls us to care for the ones no one else cares about

According to this parable, Jesus knew that the world he left behind would include the poor, the hungry, the prisoners, the sick. The appalling state of the world did not surprise him. He did, however, make plans to deal with it: a long-range plan and a short-range plan. The long-range plan unfolds when he returns in power and glory, to straighten out the planet earth. The short-range plan began right away. He turned that awesome responsibility over to the ones he left behind to carry on his work:

**Luke 14:12-14, New International Version:**

“Then Jesus said to his host, ‘When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbours; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be

blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.’ ”

“Where is God when it hurts?” we often ask. The answer to that is yet another question: “Where is the church when it hurts?”

### 4) The miracle of grace

How is it possible that such a crew of sinners like us can be called the church, the Body of Christ? Again, I answer that with another question: How can one sinful person, I myself, be accepted as a child of God? Only by the miracle of God’s grace.

**2 Corinthians 4:5-6, New Living Translation:**

“We don’t go around preaching about ourselves; we preach Christ Jesus, the Lord. All we say about ourselves is that we are your servants because of what Jesus has done for us. . . .

“But this precious treasure — this light and power that now shine within us—is held in perishable containers, that is, in our weak bodies. So everyone can see that our glorious power is from God and is not our own.”

Have you experienced the grace of God in your life? Do you know—I don’t mean hope with your fingers crossed, but know *for absolutely certain*—that God loves you?

I emphasize this because it is the vital key for loving others. When you know the unconditional, unending, unlimited, love of Jesus in your own life, then you will have what is needed to share love. You will be able to go beyond your little circle of friends, and love others in the community, in the world. You will be able to seek out the ones that no one else cares about, and put love into action.

### Next Steps:

- Put yourself in the other person’s place  
The key to welcoming people is to be more concerned with what the visitor thinks of us, rather than what we think of the visitor.

**Philippians 2:3-4, New Living Translation:**

Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourself. And look out for one another’s interests, not just for your own.

In other words, sometimes you have to go out of your way to make others feel welcome. The emphasis is on them, not us.

- **Talk with people**  
Believe it or not, even in a small church like ours, there are still people who are strangers. Last fall in a conversation I happened to mention the name of someone else in the congregation. The person I was talking with interrupted me and said, “I’m embarrassed to say this, but I’ve been coming here for 20 years, and I don’t know who you’re talking about.” I pointed out the person in the crowd, and she said, “Oh yes, I recognize him... but I guess I don’t really know him.”

If that’s what it’s like among *regulars*, what will it feel like for newcomers?

In fact, we need to do this for others besides visitors. Why not go over to that person who’s been here for years, but you still don’t know their name or where they live? Step outside your comfortable circle of friends. Sometimes you have to go out of your way to make people feel welcome.

- **Listening with Jesus prayer**  
Our natural human behaviour is to be self-centred. It’s for a good reason – it helps us to survive. But Jesus calls us to a higher life than just surviving.

**Romans 12:13, Today's English Version:**  
Share your belongings with your needy fellow Christians, and open your homes to strangers.

**Hebrews 13:1-2, Today's English Version:**  
Keep on loving one another as Christians. Remember to welcome strangers in your homes. There were some who did that and welcomed angels without knowing it.

Learn to listen with the ears of Jesus. Pray like this every day, several times throughout the day, for the coming week. Not just once; but throughout the day, especially when you meet someone, you can just say something like, “Let me listen with your ears, Lord.”

Lord,  
I long to be part of a caring church family;  
but often I’m not sensitive to what people  
are really saying.  
Please teach me to listen with your ears of  
compassion.  
I pray for \_\_\_\_\_  
[a need you’ve heard recently].

Lord, help me respond with a heart that  
cares the way you do. Amen.