

## **Essentialism: Clarifying What Really Matters**

*A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on November 26, 2017  
on Matthew 25:31-46 at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

I've told you about the book I read recently called *Essentialism*, and about how author Greg McKeown addresses our modern proclivity to more — more work and tasks we think we need to do than hours we have to do them in. The answer, he suggests, is the way of the essentialist, a way that is filled with understanding the essence of what we seek in this life, exploring the difference in the trivial and the vital components to make it happen, so that then we can eliminate the trivial many to execute the vital few. One key concept in the way of the essentialist is that of clarity, where individuals and organizations clarify what really matters to the pursuit of their goals. "When there is lack of clarity," McKeown says, "people waste time and energy on the trivial many. When they have sufficient levels of clarity, they are capable of greater breakthroughs and innovations — greater than people even realize they ought to have — in those areas that are truly vital."<sup>1</sup>

In McKeown's view, clarity helps discern the good from the essential. Clarity constrains and focuses. For example, any major you might pursue in college would be good, but trying to pursue five different majors at the same time would not get you that essential degree. Attempting five

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<sup>1</sup> Greg McKeown, *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less*, p121-122.

different perfectly-fine careers in five different perfectly-capable industries likely wouldn't lead to excellence in one. On the other hand, clarity of purpose, of identity, of direction, of priorities can unleash robust potential.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps it was clarity that Jesus was after in today's gospel reading. He knew that his ministry on this earth was drawing to a close. The teaching that began amidst the crowds on a mountaintop in Galilee with blessings for the poor, the mourning, the meek, the hungry is ending among his disciples atop the Mount of Olives with warnings of the coming end, parables of judgment for those in charge, apocalyptic images of what will come. His face is firmly fixed on Jerusalem: the plotting for his arrest that was already underway, the price of betrayal (those thirty pieces of silver) that would be paid within hours, the final meal he'd share with his disciples the next day, and the events of the end — the denial, arrest, trial, and crucifixion that awaited him that week. This would be his last lesson, his parting word of instruction for those who desire to follow in his way. What better time for clarity than this?

For when the Son of Man comes in glory... all the nations will be gathered before him, and there will be a separation: sheep on the right and goats on the left. Those on his right will inherit the kingdom, receiving the deepest abundance of God! Why?

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<sup>2</sup> McKeown, p124.

I was hungry and you fed me,  
I was thirsty and you gave me a drink,  
I was homeless and you gave me a room,  
I was shivering and you gave me clothes,  
I was sick and you stopped to visit,  
I was in prison and you came to me.<sup>3</sup>

But those on his left will be cast out, left behind, royally renounced  
until the end of the age. Why?

I was hungry and you gave me no meal,  
I was thirsty and you gave me no drink,  
I was homeless and you gave me no bed,  
I was shivering and you gave me no clothes,  
Sick and in prison, and you never visited.<sup>4</sup>

When faced with these words of clarity, these essentials for a life of faith, both sheep and goats can only muster surprise. Or as Barbara Brown Taylor says, "the sheep did not know what they had done right any more than the goats knew what they had done wrong, which seems to suggest that God's judgment will take us all by surprise, sheep and goats alike."<sup>5</sup> But still we ask: *What do you mean? When did we see you hungry or thirsty? When were you homeless or helpless, impaired or imprisoned? We merely have been moving through the motions, traveling with our*

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<sup>3</sup> This telling pulled from *The Message* translation of Matthew 25:31-46.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, "Knowing Glances," *The Preaching Life*, p136.

*herds like sheep or goats. We've been looking for you everywhere; how could we have known to look for you in all those places?*

Some two thousand plus years later, are these not still our questions? Are we not still wondering where to go to look for God? In the darkest nights of our soul, don't we plead with God to be revealed, to show that Divine face so that we know we're not entirely alone in this life? Aren't we wondering what Way we're to walk, what right-believing or right-acting we're to do, what is deepest and truest in this world? Do we not still wonder how we might discover clarity on who we're supposed to be, or what we're supposed to do, or how we're supposed to live? *When was it that we saw you, Jesus?*

These questions may continue to cloud our view, but the answer from Christ our King remains as crystal clear now as it was then. *Whatever you did to the least of these, you did to me.* It's as if Jesus is reminding us that when our sight is blocked, his is clear; when our vision is concealed, his is revealed; when our perceptions are trivial, his are essential. What comfort for the overlooked! What hope for the ignored! No matter who you are, I see you! I'm with you. I'm everywhere you are; there's nowhere you can go that I won't be, no hunger pains or dry mouths I won't share, no streets I haven't walked or refuge I haven't been turned away from, no illness I can't feel or bondage I can't understand.

I suppose then that the invitation is twofold and clear: first, we must equip our eyes to see, and then, we must train our hands and feet to

respond. Only then are we able to discern the essentials and have clarity on what matters most.

Throughout the month of November, we've talked together about our past, present, and future for our beloved community. We've realized that our history together is ripe with innovation and inclusion, risk and growth, meaningful ministry and works of Love that have been substantial by any measure. When assessing all that we are and do as a church, we've asked ourselves: into the future, what should we keep or add, improve or discard? We've then mapped all those assets and wondered together about how they can most creatively be leveraged for the good of the world.

I must say, you all have shared brilliantly and courageously your love for our church and your God-sized dreams for our hopeful future. Your ideas have been plentiful — midday concerts on our front steps or Bible studies and lunch for those who work downtown, healthy/sustainable/collaboratively-prepared Wednesday night meals, deeper and more nourishing faith formation through home-based small groups, spaces for artists and makers to create in our midst, more streamlined governance —> less meetings, better technology, fresher graphics and language that describe who we are, more neighborly experiences with those right around us, creative solutions to assist those in debt or with significantly-limited resources, new partnerships that broaden our reach. So many good, meaningful, hopeful ideas that demonstrate your deep love for our church

and engagement within it. As your pastor, I have found myself beaming with pride, time and time again this month, as I hear the way God is nudging all of you to lead our church into its faithful future.<sup>6</sup>

But even as we now begin to discern what is most essential to our congregation, what is the shape and the task that we are uniquely equipped to do in this world, might we take our cue from Christ's clarity?

Because if we fuel our future with innovation, satiating our appetite for what's new and next by pioneering cutting-edge models for ministry in every corner of who we are and what we do — from space to governance, worship to staffing, ministries to missions, **without also** nourishing our common life with the devastatingly simple act of feeding those who are hungry, then we will have missed what really matters.

If we dive into the deep waters of discipleship, drawing so regularly from the theological well of scripture, tradition, experience, and reason that we feel immersed — dare I say even *baptized* — by what we learn, **without also** scooping up a cup of that life-giving water for the thirsty of body, parched of spirit, or dehydrated of soul, then we will have missed what really matters.

If we celebrate our long history of inclusiveness and hospitality by creating ample opportunities for outreach, particularly to those who live, work, and play downtown, and if in so doing we grow in number, swelling

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<sup>6</sup> Ideas captured from our three sessions entitled "A Story Worth Sharing: Conversations Around Mission & Vision."

our ranks and filling these walls and halls with lovely, well-meaning, intelligent, thoughtful, young, and vibrant people who are ready to bake pies for our potlucks, teach Sunday School, tithe, AND serve on the Policy Committee, **without also** welcoming the stranger, the outcast, the homeless, the marginalized, the different with equal excitement and warmth, then we will have missed what really matters.

If we clothe ourselves with purposeful partnerships, binding up the good work of Love through First Baptist and furthering it through the organizations, schools, non-profits, churches, and agencies that surround us, **without also** remembering to cover those naked with grief or exposed by loneliness, those defenseless against the punishing elements of our natural or created world, then we will have missed what really matters.

If we fix what is broken or bleeding in our midst, find remedies for this lethargic ministry program or that limping mission endeavor, **without also** showing up for each other in seasons of sickness or suffering, grasping the hands of the helpless, or bringing about healing for the ailing, then we will have missed what really matters.

If we streamline our facilities and develop a church house that is more nimble and flexible, if we liberate ourselves from the shackles of maintaining more space than we need, **without also** working to bring freedom to those imprisoned and held captive by addiction, debt, hatred, fear, or the worst choice of their lives, then we will have missed what really matters.

If this vision for our church's future compels us soon to significant and sacrificial giving, if we harness that vision and energy into shared millions raised for securing our foundation, **without also** meeting the most basic human needs of our neighbors, then we will have missed what really matters.

The directive is simple; the invitation is clear. *When did we see you, Jesus? Whatever you did to the least of these, you did to me!* Seeing the face of Christ in all we meet, doing the work of Love in the world... those are the essentials, that's the work that matters most — for you, for me, for us.

We might be surprised to find that what we're searching for is right under our noses. Or we might be surprised to find out we've been doing it all along. And who knows... in all our seeing and doing, we might just meet the King in our midst and the God whose other name is Surprise. Amen!