

Covenant Word

Called to the Very Least

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-34

Poetic license was taken with the scripture to personalize it for John Taylor Bell who was ordained this Sunday.

*A Message by
The Reverend Sarah
Jackson Shelton
Pastor
Sunday
November 26, 2017*

Just inside the glass lobby on University Boulevard, there is a room tucked away that we use for preschoolers on Sunday mornings and Wednesday nights. Lest we think that the children are only playing there, passing the time until their parents are finished with more important adult-type things, let me assure you that there is a lot of learning going on in that room.

For instance, Julie Burge recently put in a request to an adult Sunday School class to please contribute their canned goods for the Greater Birmingham Ministries food drive a little early. She needed the food items for her Wednesday night Mission Friends' class so that she could set up a pretend grocery store in their room. Now, she had thought about taking the preschoolers to an actual grocery store, but a handful of preschoolers set loose in a grocery store, gave even Julie Burge pause.

So, while the adults collected, Cindy Goodwin talked to the children about ways they could help at home. If they could take their plates to the kitchen sink, clean up their rooms, put their dirty clothes in the laundry hamper, retrieve the mail from the mailbox and a variety of other chores, might they earn a little allowance that they could bring to spend at the Mission Friends grocery store? You see, these four and five year olds are learning about the poor and hungry and how they have responsibility to care for the least of these. The teachers wanted the children to experience what it feels like to take the money they had earned and use it for the benefit of someone other than themselves. So the children went home with a

list of ways to help and how much each one was worth to hit their parents up for a missions project.

Five preschoolers came back the next week. They had, between the five of them, collected \$16.08. They went shopping among the 98 items collected for the store and in the end, the canned goods and the \$16.08 all went to the Greater Birmingham Ministries food drive.

Now this was a simple learning exercise, and what Jesus tells us in Matthew's gospel is that simple things have ultimate consequences. Studying great philosophies and changing national policy are all admirable, but Jesus seems to be saying to us that we must not miss the most important things because we are absorbed in great things. What are those important things? Loving God with all of who we are and loving our neighbor as we love ourselves. In today's reading, Jesus specifically highlights the neighbor who is in need; when they are hungry, when they are thirsty, when they are estranged, naked, sick and when they are in prison. Jesus makes it clear that if we perform all manner of good, it doesn't mean anything if we have ignored someone in need.

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This ethic is found in the Bible repeatedly. The heart of the Jewish law is found in Deuteronomy 15: "Do not be hard-hearted toward your needy neighbor; rather open your hand." Psalm 82 is a prayer for orphans and the weak. It reads: "Rescue the weak and the needy, deliver them from the hands of the wicked." (vs. 4) In the New Testament, one out of every sixteen verses is about the poor and their care. In Matthew, Mark and Luke, one out of ten verses is about poverty. In Luke, one out of seven (John Buchanan, "The Least of These," Nov 16, 2008, Fourth Presbyterian Church. He is quoting Jim Wallis' book *God's Politics*)

Jim Wallis, American activist and evangelical writer, decided that he and his peers would imitate Thomas Jefferson in order to discover just what the Bible has to say about the poor. You will remember that Jefferson cut out of the New Testament all the passages that he did not like. Wallis, however, cut out every reference to

**Dear Friends,
Thank you for
wanting to read and
study these thoughts
more carefully.
Please know that I do
not take full credit for
anything that may be
contained within,
because I may have
read or heard
something at some
point during my
pilgrimage and do not
remember its source
and thus, cannot give
the rightful author
his/her credit. I pray
that you will find
inspiration and
encouragement.**



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Worship with us each Sunday
morning at 9 a.m. and for Bible
study at 10:30 a.m.

the poor. As you might imagine, what was left was very fragile and full of holes. Wallis takes this Bible on speaking engagements where he likes to hold it up and say, "Here it is. This is the American Bible, full of holes." (Buchanan) It is a stark reminder that we are not so much accountable for believing right doctrine, or belonging to the right church, or espousing the right opinion on social issues. Jesus will hold us accountable for the ways we treat the poor.

The evangelicals of my childhood will be disappointed that Jesus doesn't say anything about judgment being based on if we smoke or dance, drink or shop on Sundays. He doesn't mention one word about sexual behavior, creed, mode of baptism nor does he give a schedule for when communion should be served. No, Jesus' stunningly simple criteria is that we are accountable for our treatment of the least of these. (Buchanan) It is the distinguishing characteristic of the Christian church.

Elaine Pagels, a history of religion professor at Princeton University, says from the very beginning of the church, what attracted people to it was the presence of caring love. (*Beyond Belief*) Those in need could find immediate, practical help almost anywhere in the empire where great cities were crowded with people. But the inhabitants of the vast shantytowns that surrounded those cities were full of people trying to survive by begging, stealing and prostitution. It was Christians who contributed money to fund support for orphans abandoned on the streets and garbage dumps. It was Christians who brought food, medicine and companionship to prisoners forced to work in mines, or were banished to prison islands or were held in jails. And when the plagues hit during the middle ages, it was the Christians who stayed to care for the sick and dying. Pagels says this was done "because Jews and Christians believed that God, who created humankind, actually loved the human race and evoked love in return...what God requires is that human beings love one another and offer help – especially to the neediest."

In Washington D.C., there is a food distribution center that the Sojourners organization operates. Mary Glover is present every Saturday to pray with all the volunteers before the center opens. It is said that Mary prays like someone who knows who she is talking to. So as the hungry line up outside and wait in all kinds of weather, Mary gathers the volunteers inside and prays, "Lord, we know you will be comin' through this line today, so Lord, help us to treat you well." (Buchanan) Jesus says in the gospel reading, "Because I am present in human need, you will see my face in the face of everyone who needs you."

The source of Baptist Church of the Covenant's beginnings can be traced back to a child who was brought into the church as a part of an after-school ministry. Twila Fortune came to

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Birmingham's First Baptist Church for tutoring and snacks and recreation. She was treated as the precious child of God's that she is. She loved it so, that she invited her mother, Winifred, to attend Sunday School and worship with her. It was there that Twila heard about Jesus and sought baptism never realizing the full ramifications of what an African American child's decision to be a follower of Jesus would do to an all-white Southern Baptist First Church in Birmingham, Alabama in 1970.

From its very beginnings, Taylor, Baptist Church of the Covenant dreamed, longed for, attempted and was unsuccessful in having one staff person solely responsible for ministry engagement. Someone who could be informed about the world of non-profits in our city and who could keep a fresh challenge before this congregation. Someone who could walk among us and worship with us, calling us by name to connect personal gifts with community need.

As a Samford University student, you came our way. Your earnest involvement had us talking behind your back. We asked one another in hushed tones: "Wouldn't it be something to have Taylor Bell coordinate the ministries of Baptist Church of the Covenant some day?" But you still had some discernment to do, and then there was seminary, and we still had no money to fund such a position. We seemed stuck in making the same excuse year after year after year. Then we received a vote of confidence from someone

in the greater Christian community who was willing to put up a matching gift in order to get us off the ground and call someone to serve on our staff. It took us awhile to get the job description written and to figure out the budgeting, but lo and behold, when we looked at the available applications, there was your name resurfacing as a seminary graduate.

To your ordination council, you wrote:

I understand my vocational journey into ecclesial ministry as answering God's call on my life; as stepping into God's created purpose for me. ...I want to do that at Baptist Church of the Covenant because Covenant is home, the place where I am known, accepted, celebrated and loved. They want me to share all of who I am with them. They have invited me to experience and practice the radical

hospitality of Christ, which, I believe is how the [larger] Church is to be defined. Like Christ, we are to extend radical hospitality that is a prophetic challenge to society's norms and institutions, as it upends the culture's governing prejudices. Radical hospitality is offering grace as people find community that loves them for who they are.

We are counting on you, Taylor, to lead us in the prophetic challenge of extending hospitality to those within the walls of the church and beyond. Help us to be grace-filled and courageous so that the least of these will be considered and responded to as if they are Jesus Christ.

So maybe it is important for me to say that the five preschoolers I mentioned earlier are: Willie Fortune (yes, Twila's son), Danny Martin, Jarrett Stinnett, Kate Gasparetto, and Grant Hawley. I believe it is especially important to name them on this ordination day, because Taylor, my hope and prayer is that one day, they too, will decide to love their neighbors with all of who they are, and that this conviction will bring them to their knees on this bench. Then, we will come to lay our hands on their heads to set them apart for ministry to all those in whom the face of Jesus can be seen. If you and I, Taylor, live into our vocations, then maybe we will celebrate that day together. May it be so, Amen.