

## What The World Needs Now...

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There is a room in the Capitol building in Washington DC you won't likely see on C-SPAN. According to the Associated Press it is located "just off the suite of second-floor offices of the House speaker, centered in the Capitol, on its west end closest to the National Mall." It features a stained glass window with a central cartouche depicting George Washington on bended knee, his hands clasped in prayer. It is the Congressional Prayer Room.

In May of 2025, while covering Speaker Mike Johnson's efforts to pass Trump's "big beautiful bill", an Associated Press reporter was invited by Johnson to see the prayer room. In the article Johnson claims he goes there to pray, a lot, although the way he talks about it sounds like his mind is already mind up about what needs to be done and that he turns to God to cheerlead his ego rather than counsel his heart. An observation not lost on the reporter either, who repeatedly asked Johnson, a self-proclaimed, devout Christian, to square the "big beautiful bill" with Matthew 25.

At the time the Congressional Budget office estimated that under proposals in the bill, some 8.6 million people will no longer have health care, and 3 million a month will stop receiving the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program, known as SNAP.

Meanwhile, Matthew 25: 35-40 says,  
"For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.' Then the righteous will answer Him, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You something to drink? And when did we see You as a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? And when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You? 'And the King will answer and say to them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it for one of the least of these brothers or sisters of Mine, you did it for Me.'"

Not surprisingly, Johnson fumbled, clumsily trying to remake the gospel message in the image of the bill.

And just the other day, Johnson did it again. This time arguing against the head of the Roman Catholic Church, Pope Leo XIV, who used Matthew 25 to critique the current administration and call for “deep reflection” on how the United States treats migrants.

Johnson again fumbled. His response was replete with a chapter and verse style defense of his position suggesting he has no ability or interest in anything other than a superficial reading of the text.

Now, it has been said one can take sacred texts like the Bible literally or seriously, but not both. Whether this is true across the board is debatable, I suppose, but what it really means is that more often than not the text contains deeper meaning than a surface reading of the text suggests.

When we consider a text like Matthew 25, we are challenged to reflect on the spirit of the words. What does feeding, relieving thirst, clothing, welcoming a stranger, or visiting someone in need mean beyond the literal definition of those actions?

And why does Jesus add, “Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it for one of the least of these brothers or sisters of Mine, you did it for Me.” What is the deeper than literal meaning of his words?

At the conclusion of the Nuremberg trials following WWII, Captain G. M. Gilbert, who had been appointed as a prison psychologist, famously observed, “Evil, I think, is the absence of empathy,”

Empathy is the experience of understanding another person’s thoughts, feelings, and condition from their point of view rather than from one’s own. Which is to say, the ability to put yourself in someone else’s shoes.

If I notice someone in need on the street and walk by without so much as a glance in their direction that’s apathy. If I look in their direction and feel badly for their situation, that’s sympathy. But, if I look in their direction and start to imagine what it’s like to be that person, the mental anguish of being ignored and rendered invisible, the physical pain of hunger, illness, or exposure to the elements, the spiritual angst of feeling abandoned, without anyone or anywhere to turn...that’s empathy.

Returning to Matthew 25, we encounter Jesus speaking of experiences in very basic terms that we can all relate to in some way or another...hunger, thirst, sickness, estrangement, imprisonment.

The plain language, describing experiences common to all human beings, serves to elicit empathy. We all know what being hungry or thirsty feels like. We've all been sick, all been strangers somewhere, and even imprisoned, if not literally, at least figuratively, by obsessions, addictions, habits, and so forth.

In more dramatic fashion, our reading this morning by the poet Paul Laurence Dunbar uses the powerful imagery of a caged bird to convey the experience of marginalization, of being able to observe life outside the cage while being denied full participation in that life due to systemic oppression. Its intended audience includes both those who know what it is to be marginalized and those in need of a little poetic shoe horn to get into the shoes of those who are marginalized. Indeed, the poem, while titled, "Sympathy", is really an expression and invitation to empathize with those Jesus might call, "the least of these brothers or sisters of Mine."

Now, whether you agree with Captain Gilbert that the absence of empathy is the defining factor in evil or not, empathy is nonetheless a crucial gateway...from feeling to action.

In our story for all ages this morning, we heard about Ellery and his friends helping a neighbor paint their house, fix a ramp, and plant flowers. Then they all go and do a beach clean up. Later we're offered some examples of ways in which we might help our neighbors. The story lifts up responsiveness to a need, as an example of what it means to be neighborly.

When we respond to needs rooted in our experience of empathy for another, whether they're literally our neighbor or not, we move into the practice of compassion. The word "compassion" comes from the Latin phrases "compati" and "compassio," both of which mean "to suffer with." Compassion, characterized by a deep desire to alleviate the suffering of others, compels us to act. It takes empathy a step further.

If I see someone in need on the street in the cold and instead of walking by, feeling badly for them, or imagining what it's like for that person, give them my gloves, that's compassion. It may not be the only thing I can do, but it is something I may be moved to do to alleviate their suffering.

In Buddhism, the cultivation and practice of compassion goes hand in hand with realizing our interconnectedness and is integral to the path of enlightenment. Likewise, in Matthew 25, when Jesus says, "Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it [exhibited compassion] for one of the least of these brothers or sisters of Mine, you did it for Me.", he proclaiming our interconnectedness.

Incidentally, Matthew 25:35-40 falls within a section of the gospel in which those who will gain entry to Kingdom of Heaven are separated from those barred from it. And the ticket to entry is not belief, as some suggest, but the cultivation and practice of compassion.

Now, Nirvana in Buddhism and The Kingdom Heaven in Christianity aren't really the same thing, but the two traditions nonetheless agree, you can't get there from here without compassion.

I try to remember this as I type "Associated Press" into the search bar each morning. I know 9 times out of 10 when I click the link the page that greets me will be filled with headlines that will give me pause about anything good or hopeful I might say from this pulpit related to the nature of our species. And indeed it is all too easy to join with those given to our baser instincts and worse impulses...to wish harm to real and perceived evildoers or to entertain thoughts of vengeance against those we feel slighted, cheated, or oppressed by.

Of course it is helpful to have a friend or two you can share your anger, frustration, or outrage with, especially if after tossing around a few expletive laden ideas you break out in laughter at the absurdity of it all. Then, perhaps, you realize, as the noted 20th C. theologian Reinhold Niebuhr observed, "Every experience proves that the real problem of our existence lies in the fact that we ought to love one another, but do not."

A popular song from the 1960's claims, "What the world needs now is love, sweet love." The world, of course, does need love. It is the only thing that will ultimately save us from ourselves. But love can't be manufactured. We can't produce it on demand. It must be awakened, nurtured, and reinforced by action.

This is our life's work. Our mission, if you will, as human beings. And right now we need all hands...or hearts...on deck.

So many people look at the state of the world and throw their hands up in despair, lamenting, "There's nothing I can do!"

I call BS.

Or, in the gentler tone of Howard Thurman from our call to worship, "This is the great deception."

There is something you can do. You can foster love in the world.

This doesn't mean resolving to be a "good" person, whatever that means. It doesn't mean overlooking or excusing evil, or enabling wrongdoing to keep the peace. It doesn't even mean liking everyone. Nor does it mean to stop protesting or working for justice.

Instead, it means in the most basic sense, paying attention. As the poet Mary Oliver famously confessed, "I don't know exactly what a prayer is. I do know how to pay attention."

We foster love by discerning and attending to our interconnectedness and responding with empathy and compassion.

In this lies the secret to our resilience and our salvation.

And so, forget about Mike Johnson in the Congressional Prayer Room and how he practices his faith and instead practice yours. Shift your gaze from your doomscrolling, look past the headlines and through the bars of your catastrophizing, and like the caged bird, sing! Sing with your eyes and your intuition, your mind, and your heart, your words and your actions. Sing with your life songs of liberation through love.

And do not delay, for what the world needs now is your song.

Amen and Blessed Be