

## **Who's Counting**

### **Matthew 25:31-40**

Often when a person does a favor for another person, they might say "You owe me." And even when they don't, we sometimes think to ourselves, "wow, I will have to find some way to pay them back." If one person buys another a meal, the response might be "I'll pay next time." We have a funny way of keeping track of kindness owed and kindness received.

The movie, *Pay it Forward*, which was released in October of 2000 tells the story of a 7<sup>th</sup> grade boy, Trevor McKinney. Trevor's social studies teacher, Mr. Simonet, gives the class an assignment on the first day of school. It hinges on the students feeling that the world neither requires or expects anything from them, after all they are just kids. The extra credit assignment is to think of an idea to change our world and put it into action. Some of the students came up with ideas like asking all the children in China to jump at the same time in order to knock the earth off it's axis.

However, Trevor comes up with an idea that if one person does something really big for three people, and tells them that they need to do 3 big favors for 3 other people, then the world could change as the numbers exponentially grow. He decides, unbeknownst to his mother, to invite a homeless man named Jerry into their home for a meal and a warm night's sleep, then gives him money to buy new clothes and shoes to go for a job interview. He decides to help his social studies teacher who seems lonely to have dinner and begin dating his mom. And, he helps another student in his class who was being bullied.

The ripples of helping and caring for strangers ends up continuing and restores broken family relationships, helps save a woman from jumping off a bridge, and results in a reporter being given a car when his was destroyed in a police chase. The concept was simple, potentially utopian, but even the pessimistic adults find themselves taking it seriously when challenged to do something big and not paying it back, but paying it forward.

This week with our mission trip participants, I invited them to be on the lookout for someone not getting what they deserved, but for us to dig deeper and give out of the joy of giving. We saw members of the community finding joy in serving us. We got joy from sitting and playing games with seniors in an assisted living home. All of us ended up gardening and affirming that's not something that we enjoy in real life. We painted buildings we would never occupy or inhabit.

However, seeing a project completed, or hearing about how another team went to the same church or campground and continued our work and hearing from the staff about the cumulative impact on a region that is generally economically depressed was inspiring. Sometimes we were helping business, some of us were trying to make a minor league baseball stadium look a little cleaner...which might lead us to determine they don't need or warrant help from a mission team. Yet, we discovered that determining whether an individual or organization was deprived enough or struggling enough to be helped wasn't really the point.

On my team, one of the other churches kept using a refrain throughout the week when they were dig deep to serve better. They'd shout (because I think the kids were always speaking at high volumes) "*Be a Sheep!!*" or "*Look at Ben being a sheep?*" They were referencing our passage for this morning, where Jesus reminds his followers that they are to serve with generous hearts, not discounting someone because of what they've spent their money on- if someone's hungry, feed them. Don't write someone off because they are in jail, just visit them.

If someone needs clothing, give them clothes. If they need help tending the weeds in the cracks of their homeless ministry, then help, and recognize that as you humble yourselves and stop counting what you're owed or what someone does or doesn't deserve, we find Jesus in the middle of that. If Jesus is God's Son, and we are all God's children, then it makes sense that every person we help is like helping Jesus.

Helping others is not confined to trips to another region...we all having things we can do right here, potentially in Park Ridge, potentially in Chicago, in our schools, at our jobs, through our church, through Lincoln Park Shelter – where we will serve THIS WEEK and the list goes on and on. It doesn't matter our age or handyperson skills. It doesn't matter our economic status.

What matters is our willingness to humble ourselves, slow down long enough to see the people around us, and be willing to try. It's almost as though God has given us an extra credit assignment to stop counting, and simply pay it forward. After all, we are the beneficiaries of God's love, that doesn't keep score of our mistakes or worthiness, and instead offers us abundant and amazing grace. Like the waters of baptism, we remember that we are all claimed and loved by a God who never gives up on us, so may we too never give up on God or on one another. Amen.