

October 12 2008 – SERMON SUMMARY

Identifying with “the Least of These” (Is.58:6-10, Mt.25:34-40)

Introduction: It’s not always easy for us to identify with people who are different from us – from different socio-economic levels, different educational backgrounds, different nationalities, language, race, religion, character, temperament, etc. Do you cross those barriers readily, or is it a steep climb? Do you have the gift of empathy, solidarity, mercy?

▪ The God of the universe crossed the greatest barriers in the world in order to identify with us, to make Himself known & available to us, to rescue us out of our sin & death. He went from Creator to creation, Infinite to finite, Immortal/mortal, Heaven/earth, Spirit/flesh, God/man, Holiness/sinfulness (He was made to be sin for us, bearing our guilt on the cross!), Blessedness/curse (He put Himself under our curse), Author of Life/put to death. This must mean He really loves us a lot!

▪ The implication of this great love is that we are to love one another as He loved us: generously, sacrificially, overcoming every barrier, identifying with each other no matter how great our differences or offenses. Christians are to be a people known for our love! Needless to say, we often don’t measure up, but God just keeps on loving us; that’s the motivation & power source for us to also keep on learning to love. By His grace at work in us, we can overcome the obstacles & learn to identify with each other so that we come to love like He does – it’s the family likeness!

▪ This was always God’s commandment, but human nature tries to reduce the commandment to its lowest terms: when the Pharisees asked, “who is my neighbor?” they were trying to narrow the margins of the commandment to a “select few” so it wouldn’t be so overwhelming. Jesus answered them with His parable of the Good Samaritan: who in your pathway of life is the one in need? In the parable of the Judgment of the Nations, it could be the hungry & thirsty, the stranger or foreigner, the poor & ragged, the sick, imprisoned & oppressed. Jesus identifies so closely with these individuals that when we do anything good for them, He says it’s like doing good to Him; & when we fail to even notice them, we’re ignoring, rejecting, denying Jesus Himself. These words should motivate us to overcome the barriers (1st the ones in us!), so we can learn to identify with the “underdogs” of the world! Let’s expand our hearts to identify with “the least of these” our brothers & sisters.

1) We should identify with our fellow Christians who are being persecuted. In fact, today Christians are the most persecuted religious group in the world, & persecution has intensified over the past few years.

▪ Paul Marshall, *Their Blood Cries Out*: “Today more than 200 million Christians around the world suffer imprisonment, abuse and even death because of their faith.” News is especially coming from the persecuted church in Orissa state where the Hindu-led government is seeking to destroy the Christian church & all Christian influence in India. Orissa Christians are getting a special kind of blessing that we in the West would rather not experience (“Blessed are the persecuted...”).

▪ The persecuted church in China, Korea, & Vietnam is a standing witness to us in the West of how persecution sharpens one’s perspective of eternity & the present. During the military government in China, when it was against the law to profess Christian faith, the churches would gather in secret in order to worship the Lord together (just like they did here in Spain during much of the Franco era). These Chinese Christians had to be very quiet so they wouldn’t be

discovered; so they would agree on a hymn, then sing to the Lord in silence. Their lips would move together as they sang the hymn in their hearts, but without any sound coming from their voices. Yet according to their own testimony, they experienced an amazing visitation of the Lord in the midst of their silence. Can you praise the Lord without making a sound? Could you proclaim the Lord's faithfulness under persecution? Would your faith survive? Would you operate on a different set of values?

2) Another group of oppressed human beings we need to identify with are modern-day slaves, the result of human trafficking.

- A pastor in northeastern India recently learned that young women from his area were being trafficked into the sex trade or into slave labor in New Delhi, Mumbai, & other Indian cities. The region's failing economy means many families are desperate for new sources of revenue, leaving them vulnerable to the false claims of traffickers who convince them that, for a fee, they can get jobs for their daughters in restaurants or as house maids in the city. Instead, the young women end up in brothels or in abusive domestic service with no way to escape. We hear similar stories coming from Eastern Europe.

- The Council of Europe stated last year that "human trafficking has reached epidemic proportions over the past decade, with a global annual market of about \$42.5 billion." U.S. State Department (in 2004) estimated 600,000 to 800,000 people were being illegally trafficked each year, 80% of them women & children forced into the illicit sex trade (easily over a million now). UNICEF says as long as there's money to be made from exploiting the young & defenseless, trafficking will continue.

- Slavery & human trafficking are nothing new in this world. Wintley Phipps, founder of an organization for children of prisoners, knows how to identify with them. He explains that slaves who went to America didn't know the heptatonic scale (do re mi), but used a simpler 5-note version, which actually corresponds to the black notes on a piano; so most Negro spirituals can be played on the black notes of the piano (the pentatonic scale, with five pitches per octave). The melody of one of our most popular Christian hymns was written on this "slave scale": "Amazing Grace." Sometimes called a "white spiritual," it was written by John Newton, former slave ship captain (1725-1807), but the hymnbook says the music's origin is unknown. Phipps & other musicologists believe that its melody, built on the pentatonic scale, was quite likely a West African tune which Newton heard on board the slave ship, as those wretched souls in their limited crawl-space in the hold of the ship moaned their way across the Atlantic, trying to console themselves with the music of their homeland. When he was converted, Newton wrote his testimony in this song & set the words to a slave melody. Could you proclaim God's amazing grace if you were a victim of human trafficking? Can we identify with the hopelessly enslaved?

3) A third group of "marginalized," from the Christian viewpoint, whom we need to identify with, might be Muslims.

- Father Zakaria Botros is an Arab-American evangelist reaching the Muslim world, & his enemies want to assassinate him. An *al Qaeda* website has posted his photograph & named him one of the "most wanted" infidels in the world, even putting a bounty on his head. This elderly Coptic priest from Egypt in his 70s enrages the radicals because he is waging an air war against them & he's winning. Using state-of-the-art satellite technology, he's bypassing the efforts of Islamic governments to keep the gospel out of their countries; he's directly challenging the claims of Muhammad to be a prophet & the claims of the Qu'ran to be God's word. But Botros goes on to teach Muslims from the Bible why Jesus loves them & is so ready to forgive them & adopt them into His family, no matter who they are or what they've done. An Arabic newspaper called

Botros Islam's Public Enemy #1. Botros believes passionately that God loves the whole world, including every Muslim, & that "whosoever" believes in the Lordship of Jesus Christ – Jew, Muslim, or Christian – will, in fact, receive eternal life. Not all Muslims are Radicals, but all Muslims are as spiritually lost as all other humans, & Botros wants desperately to help them find their way to forgiveness & reconciliation with the God who made them & loves them.

▪ In spite of all we hear about the growth of Muslims in the West & the "Islamization" of Europe, there are in fact more Muslims converting to Christianity than vice versa – since 2000, about 2.1 million conversions (though there's only 1 Christian missionary for every 5 million Muslims). Spiritual revival is especially occurring in Muslim Algeria since late the 1990's: there are over 10,000 Christians in the country, but more than a dozen churches have been closed by the government this year, & there are multiple judicial cases against individual Christians. Speaking of the outreach of the "Jesus" film in the Muslim world, the late Bill Bright of Campus Crusade for Christ said, "Never before in history has God moved so supernaturally to draw millions of Muslims to himself throughout the world." He reported that his office had received thousands of letters from Muslims, many telling of a dream they had of seeing Jesus declaring Himself to be "the Way." Moved by this compelling dream, they wrote to Campus Crusade's Middle East office to find out just who Jesus is. A number of people in Algeria discovered they had had the very same dream. On their own, they've formed Bible studies & are following Christ. How do we feel about those who are religiously different? Can we identify with those who are bound by the darkness of Islam as if they were simply estranged members of our own family, in need of reconciliation? Will you pray for some Muslim in your path?

4) Finally, we need to identify with the hungry & thirsty of our world, a group usually hidden from our view.

▪ The UN Food & Agriculture Organization estimates that 854 million people worldwide are undernourished (2006), 12.6% of the world's 6.6 billion people. The most vulnerable in this group are the children; geographically, more than 70% of malnourished children live in Asia, 26% in Africa & 4% in Latin America & the Caribbean.

▪ A few years ago, photographer Peter Menzel & his wife decided to travel around photographing families from different countries. They photographed 30 families, together with the food they would consume that week, taking note of the cost for each family. Their book, *Hungry Planet* (2005), shows surprising differences from one country to another, in terms of the number of people per family, the products they consume, & the weekly cost (ranging from over \$500 for a family of 4 in Germany, to \$1.23 for a family of 6 in a Chad refugee camp). Can we identify with those for whom hunger is not an occasional accident because they forgot to go to the store, but a daily experience, their lifestyle?

▪ The prophet Isaiah made it clear that God was not interested in our religious rituals; the "fasting" He really wants to see is for His people to meet the needs of the poor & oppressed. God wants you "to share your food with the hungry & to provide the poor wanderer with shelter – when you see the naked, to clothe him, & **not to turn away from your own flesh & blood....**" (Is.58:7). That's not talking about providing for your blood relatives; it's saying that other needy human beings ARE "your own flesh & blood!" IBC is participating in the World Hunger Offering that the Baptist World Alliance distributes to help the hungry of the world. We have special envelopes for this offering. Will you participate?

▪ I've met a young woman on the train a number of times lately who plays the flute; she's very talented, but she's small, thin, & smells like she hasn't had a bath in a year. Yet her music is lilting & clear; then she comes back through the train asking for a little money for her music. I

always try to have a couple of euros to share with her. I also gave her a Gospel of John (in Spanish), telling her it's the best news she'd ever read. The next time I saw her, she remembered me, so I asked if she had read the Gospel of John. She said she had, but there was a lot she didn't understand, & she wasn't even baptized (in the Catholic sense). I told her that didn't matter to God, that He loved her & wanted her to know Him. When I see her again, I'm going to keep encouraging her to read that gospel as if God Himself were speaking to her. We'd like to offer you some Gospels of John, in both English & Spanish; if you know someone you could give one of these Gospels to, take one and share the bread of life!

Conclusion: Will you care about the hungry & thirsty of the world? The special offering envelopes are to help us provide food for their stomachs; the Gospels of John are for you to share some nourishment for their souls.

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