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Weekend of Sunday, November 22, 2020
25th Sunday after Pentecost/Christ the King/Lectionary 34/Proper 29/Year A
2021 Annual Stewardship Campaign – “Faithful Amid the Fray” – Week 4
First Reading: Philippians 4:4-20
Gospel Reading: Matthew 25:31-46
Sermon Title: “Faithful Amid the Fray”

Theme

Zion's Food Distribution Ministry has been going on longer than anyone can remember. However, last March and April when we were told to stay in our homes and avoid other people, the same faithful group of volunteers led by Pam Raeburn showed up to deliver much-needed food to the increasing number of community folks who needed it. There were a couple of months when the Governor sent in the National Guard (and we appreciate them and their service) but our team was still present to organize and help the National Guard. "Faithful Amid the Fray?" You decide.

Text

Philippians 4:4-20

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

¹⁰I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. ¹¹Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. ¹²I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. ¹³I can do all things through him

who strengthens me. ¹⁴In any case, it was kind of you to share my distress.

¹⁵You Philippians indeed know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you alone. ¹⁶For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs more than once. ¹⁷Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the profit that accumulates to your account. ¹⁸I have been paid in full and have more than enough; I am fully satisfied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. ¹⁹And my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. ²⁰To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.

Matthew 25:31-46

³¹When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' ³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' ⁴⁰And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' ⁴¹Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴²for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' ⁴⁴Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' ⁴⁵Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' ⁴⁶And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

Sermon

And now, the exciting conclusion to the four-week 2021 Annual Stewardship Campaign that I have entitled, "Faithful Amid the Fray." I came up with that title months ago when I observed ministry being done despite the COVID-19 pandemic. Today's featured ministry and group of volunteers is one of Zion's longest-serving ministries and they insisted that, pandemic or not, people need food to live. And so the volunteers of our own Food Distribution Ministry did and continue to do ordinary ministry in this extraordinary time. And that makes them, "Faithful Amid the Fray."

Video

It was during that first May that I was pastor here at Zion that I was making announcements before the service. I told people that this coming Saturday would be our monthly food distribution and I remember thinking to myself at that moment, it probably has a clever name, so I asked Pam Raeburn right then in the announcements, "Pam, what do we call Food Distribution?" You know what she said? "Food Distribution." That was my first introduction to Food Distribution.

It was just a few months later when Richard Duffett and I got a spot on WFMJ Today to promote Zion's upcoming Benevolent Golf Outing. Derek Steyer was interviewing us and everything was going well when Derek turned to me and asked me how long Zion had been doing Food Distribution. I had only been the pastor at Zion for a few months at that time and I had no idea. And in one of my best moments on live television, I said, "Gosh, I don't know." That was it! I had nothing else! Richard saved me when he jumped in and began talking about all the other ministries that would benefit from the golf outing. Boy did I feel stupid. So the next time I saw Pam Raeburn, I asked her how long Zion had been doing the Food Distribution. You know what she said? "Gosh, I don't know. A long time."

By now you can probably predict what I'm going to say about this ministry. Back in March the Governor shut down all non-essential activity. On the third Tuesday of March, Council decided to cease live, in-person corporate worship and sent the staff home to work on reduced hours and pay. But what about Food Distribution? Food Distribution day has always been the third Saturday. Council said, if we can get people to work Food Distribution, they would allow it. Pam reorganized Food

Distribution to be a drive-through event where our volunteers would simply put the bags of food in the trunk or back seat. For a total change in the way we've always done it, it went flawlessly.

I believe the next two months, April and May, our Food Distribution was handled by the National Guard although Pam and a couple of Zion members were here to assist. When we were planning to use our own people again I began making the announcement that we were looking for volunteers to work food distribution “who were under 50 years old.” I did that because of the warnings about the virus and who was the most vulnerable. Boy did I get push back! The regular volunteers, most of whom are over 50, were insulted. I tried to explain that I was trying to protect them, and they verbally pushed me out of the way to get back to work – that is how much this ministry means to the volunteers who work it.

Do you want to be involved in a real meaningful ministry? This is the ministry for you. Now I want to be clear about something – I rarely volunteer for Food Distribution. Oh, I am almost always present at Food Distribution. I come in sprinkle a little pastor dust and leave. This is a ministry that is normally well-served by the lay members of the church and I would just be in the way of the people who really know what they are doing.

Food is one of the most basic necessities of life. None of us, from the wealthiest to the poorest can do without food. Most of our clients are the poor, the elderly, the disabled, and so on. They all know who I am and many of them tell me how thankful they are for the food. During those first months of the pandemic, we would get phone calls asking us if we were going to distribute food. As you know, there was panic buying going on by those who could afford to do it. For those who could not, they relied on food distributions, ours, and others.

As I have repeated often, for this annual stewardship campaign, I selected the First Readings from Philippians each week, but I just allowed the Gospel Readings that were prescribed by the lectionary for the week to remain. How appropriate then that this week we have Jesus telling of "the Great Judgement" in which Jesus said that there will be a separation of people at the end of this age. The ones who have lived godly lives will be rewarded with eternal life, and the ones who have lived ungodly lives will be punished with eternal punishment.

I don't mean to throw our Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton under the bus but back in 2017 she was asked if she believed in Hell and is on record as answering, "There maybe, but I think it's empty." When my day before the seat of judgment comes I will have to answer for what I taught, and this passage from Jesus' own lips is an indication that there *is* such a place and it will be populated by the godless, and I intend that none of us end up there. So, as I have said numerous times, I hope she's right, but I don't think so. I'm taking Jesus at his word.

And I don't sense Jesus talking about the Great Judgement as a threat. In fact, I hear him offering an invitation for the greatest reward. Jesus wants no one to be surprised about their eternal outcome. That would be mean. But I digress. Back to the Gospel Reading, as Jesus told of the Great Judgement he indicated that those who are godly are surprised by their reward. He said,

³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?'

When you saw the video and heard what our members said about their volunteerism, no one said, "I do this to keep myself out of Hell's fire." Or, "I need another star on my chart." They just volunteer at Food Distribution because Jesus made mercy a hallmark of his ministry and said it ought to be for his followers too.

Jesus answered by saying,

⁴⁰Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

I don't think our volunteers look into the eyes of the clients to see if they recognize Jesus, they are just doing what their Lord told his followers to do. They insist on coming out during a pandemic to help the least of these, and that, in my opinion, makes them "Faithful Amid the Fray."

During this four-week campaign, you have heard most of Paul's letter to the Philippians. That was on purpose because Paul is a good example for us of one

who is "Faithful Amid the Fray." As you know, he wrote that letter to the Philippian Christians from jail because other non-Christians were persecuting him but you would never pick up on that from this letter. On the contrary, in this final installation he wrote,

¹⁸I have been paid in full and have more than enough; I am fully satisfied.

Who says that about jail! In writing about his life in Christ, his travels as an evangelist, and the persecution he endured including jail, Paul wrote that he is owed nothing, in fact, he has been paid in full and is fully satisfied. I doubt I'll remember that, but if I could, I'd like to say that from my deathbed.

And how do we get to that spiritual high? I'm so glad you asked, because Paul told us. He wrote:

⁸Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Think on and do these things and the God of peace will be with us.

Well, I have come to the end of this 2021 Annual Stewardship Campaign that I entitled, "Faithful Amid the Fray." I hope that, like me, you are inspired by the members and the ordinary ministry they did and continue to do in this extraordinary time.

Am I encouraging you to join them? Yes, but only you can determine if that is safe for you at this time.

Am I encouraging you to do ministry? Absolutely. It is what the faithful do after they say, "I believe."

Ministry today can be a challenge. Believe me, much of my ministry is bringing comfort to the homebound, institutionalized, sick, and dying and I have not been able to do that in person like I am used to. All of us have to be adaptive and ministry is no different. The important thing is that ministry continues. This old

church has served this community for over 200 years, and it is important that it continues to do so. What we do out of this old building is vitally important. Will you please continue to support it?

Each member household was mailed a commitment card last week. I ask that you and your family prayerfully consider your commitment and get the card back to us as soon as possible. It is especially important this year since so many of our regular members are not worshipping in person at Zion yet. Being that today is also Christ the King Sunday, what better way to honor the king of the universe, and the king of our hearts, Jesus Christ, than committing to support ministry in his name.

I will conclude with a benediction that Paul himself wrote in his letter to the Philippians:

May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen