

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

A Christian perspective on service: Love your neighbor

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Matthew 25 is one of the best-known passages in the Christian scriptures — the story of the separation of the sheep and the goats.

The reward of “inheriting the kingdom prepared for you” is given to those who have given food, drink, welcome, clothing, shelter, care or prison visits “to the least of these, who are members of my family;” and eternal punishment awaits those who have not done so.

Motivated by — and sometimes, driven by — this and similar texts, and the call to “love your neighbor” in general — a value we received from our roots in Judaism — Christians always have been deeply involved in

service, especially for those who are materially poor, sick, alone or marginalized.

From New Testament Deacons to Fourth century bishops, from St Vincent de Paul to the Deacons of John Calvin’s Geneva to the Mennonites and The Salvation Army, serving those in need has been a hallmark of the Christian Church.

Most of our Protestant, Catholic, Anglican and Orthodox traditions have some formal policies, statements or dogma very much like the Principles of Catholic Social Teaching.

Such principles reflect the instructions of Christ, who calls

us all — as individuals and congregations — to work for the common good, for all people.

It is a call that is especially significant in a time of great disparity of income, health and well-being, as in the world today.

Over the centuries, we have developed many organizations that make formal the definitional compassion of the Christian message.

The challenge for us is to do more than to “feel meaning in the moment.”

For server and those served — whether at the organizational or individual level — charity means a meal, a utility bill or maybe a street-corner dollar — both persons justifiably feel good.

But the problem persists later in the day and certainly on the next day or soon after that. In

order to bring wholeness to such persons and situations, we are encouraged to develop longer-term involvement, relationships and solutions.

“Mission trips” and “service projects” are most successful when they continue beyond a week of repair or clean up and provide an opportunity for investment in each other, as well as providing the necessary supportive financial resources.

The genius of this Interfaith Year of Service in our community lies in two opportunities, as I see it, from within my Christian faith.

Thinking about a service project across faith distinctions prompts us to explore avenues that, for many of us at the congregational level, have become routine. This year, we have an opportunity to do more than we

do every year.

This year, we have a chance to talk with, plan with and conduct with a group of people we do not yet know well and to exercise our Christian compulsion for service along with the other’s urging from within their tradition — and let the opportunity become a discovery of how similar (rather than “different”) those urgings are.

And, secondly, that exploration, itself, among us and along with those being served, slows us down long enough to listen to each other and to develop the relationships so critical to bringing resolution to such difficult problems as “hunger, thirst, homelessness, exclusion, sickness, imprisonment, loneliness” as experienced by those who are also “members of (Christ’s) family.”

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