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Community of Grace

Matthew 25:34

In difficult times our human weakness is exposed. Alice Rapp, is a pastor serving a congregation in Melbourne, Florida. She has described what the church can mean to people who are living under great stress. She writes:

A year ago, eight friends began to meet weekly for dinner. We were introduced at church—some of us sang together in the choir, others worked on committees.... But what really brought us together was chemistry, the ease with which we were able to laugh together.

One year later, six of us are unemployed.... One family is now on food stamps, largely due to a son's special needs; another is living on a disability check. One couple is in danger of losing its home to foreclosure, while a second family is living off its home, mortgaged to the teeth to pay for college and, now, groceries...Not one of us is eligible for unemployment benefits. We are not counted in the monthly statistics cited on television. We are the new poor.

Last year our little group worried about pensions and health-care benefits. Now we worry about keeping gas in the car. We no longer discuss good spots to vacation or plan blowout New Year's Eve parties. Instead, we strategize about how to get by. We discuss upcoming garage sales and where to find good thrift shops.

What will save us? I don't know, but the one thing that helps, from week to week, is dinner with friends. We still gather, this fragile little group, every Friday evening... We exchange jokes and political commentary as usual, but we also trade books, clothes, furniture... We try to believe that, somehow, we'll survive this present crisis. But for now, dinner together, feels like our last best hope (*Newsweek*, November 24, 2008, page 19).

Alice Rapp and her friends have learned that in hard times we all need to be connected to communities which can anchor our lives and feed our souls. We need to be part of a community of grace.

Jesus emphasized this truth in the 25th chapter of Matthew. Here we find that Jesus is living through the last hectic days of his ministry. His conflict with the religious leaders of Israel has passed the point of no return. His ministry has become too much of a threat to the religious and political establishment. One way or another, the authorities will find a way to shut him down. It is a time when Jesus must choose every word carefully because he does not know how many more words he will be able to say to his followers. Because time is short and words are precious he paints a picture rather than preaching a sermon.

The picture that Jesus paints takes its scenery from the apocalyptic imagery of the time. His listeners were very familiar with this imagery of the last judgment in which the nations are assembled before the judgment seat of God. Indeed the use of this imagery was most common during difficult times when people were struggling with high levels of anxiety. This familiar apocalyptic imagery

places the sheep on the right as the inheritors of life. The goats are placed on the left as those who are cast into the darkness of death.

Jesus departs from the usual apocalyptic language when he describes the behavior patterns that distinguish the sheep from the goats. The sheep are those who have responded to the basic needs of their fellow human beings. They have welcomed strangers, fed the hungry, given drink to the thirsty, clothed the naked, and visited the sick and imprisoned. They are the ones who have created communities of grace which support people in hard times.

The sheep are surprised to find out who they really are. They did not know that they were the inheritors of life. They had no special status in their culture and no reason to believe that God took any interest in what they were doing. They had no reason to assume that God placed such a high priority on their efforts to create communities where people are anchored and fed. They respond, "And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing (Matthew 25:38)?" They had no idea that the communities of grace they were creating were signs of "the kingdom prepared...from the foundation of the world (Matthew 25:34)." They were surprised to learn their spiritual identity.

It was this sense of spiritual identity that John Knox called his Scottish followers to embrace. In the Fall of 1559 the cause of church reform in Scotland suffered a major reversal. This happened at the moment when they seemed on the verge of achieving their goals of freeing Scotland from France and implementing a Presbyterian church. The regent, Mary of Guise, had been running the country for her daughter, Mary, Queen of Scots. She pulled off a shrewd political move by which she outmaneuvered the Protestant leaders and forced them to flee from Edinburgh. It looked as if the movement for Scottish independence and church reform was disintegrating.

On November 8, 1559 John Knox went to Stirling to preach to a congregation which included many of these dispirited leaders. Knox analyzed recent events in the light of Psalm 80. The Psalm suggests that a dangerous crisis like the one they were facing is God's way of putting us in touch with our weakness. He reminded them that in the early days of their movement they knew how vulnerable they were. They understood that their only chance for survival was to depend on one another and to place their trust in God. In those early days they were known as "The Congregation" because they were first and foremost a community grounded in the grace of God.

Knox then stated that in the last year their perception of themselves had changed as people of wealth and influence had joined their movement. As a result they had made the mistake of believing they were strong and placing their faith in wealth and power. Instead of working together in a spirit of cooperation and mutual support, they were now caught up in petty conflicts and rivalries. Knox called them to come together in their weakness and return to the spiritual identity on which their movement had been founded. That sermon became the critical turning point in the struggle to change Scotland. Eight months later, the Parliament met in Edinburgh to begin passing the laws that established a Presbyterian church in Scotland. The newly drafted *Book of Church Discipline* emphasized that congregations were to begin doing something that had long been neglected in the "old church" in Scotland. In every parish the churches were to address the needs of the poor. The church was to be a place of refuge for people who were in crisis.

In much the same way Matthew challenged his people to recognize their weakness and come to grips with their spiritual identity. For Matthew and for us this identity is grounded in Jesus' vision of a community of grace which supports people in hard times. In this community all are welcomed, lives are anchored, and souls are fed.