

Our Values: Serve Compassionately **Matthew 25:31-40; James 2:14-17**

Rev. Dr. Nancy S. Lynn
October 11, 2026

For many years now, this church has had a three part values statement which describes how we will embody our mission and vision statements in the world. The original version was Know God. Love Others. And Serve the World. In essence, those are the three most important parts of being a disciple of Jesus Christ. If you want to be like Jesus, learn as much as you can about God, love your neighbor as yourself, and go out and serve others. Try to make the world a better place. A couple of years ago, we thought that language could use some updating so we changed it to Love Boldly. Live Curiously. And Serve Compassionately. These phrases not only tell us what to do as disciples but how to do it. So, a couple of weeks ago, we talked about what it means to not just love but to love boldly. Last week, Greg spoke on embracing differences as a way of living curiously. And we're going to round out this sermon series today with a discussion of serving compassionately.

Jesus gives us the Great Commandment: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind—and love your neighbor as yourself." In our Methodist tradition, John Wesley spoke of these two loves as personal holiness and social holiness. Wesley famously said, "There is no holiness but social holiness." In other words, faith is never simply about what happens inside us. Faith has hands. Faith has feet. Faith has a voice. Faith notices. Faith responds.

And that is precisely where our reading from James comes in. James asks: "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works?" Then James gives us a very ordinary example. Suppose you encounter a brother or sister who has no clothes and no food. You say to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill." And then you do nothing. James asks, in effect: What good is that? What good are words of compassion if they never become acts of compassion? "If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food," James says, "and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?" Then comes the conclusion: "So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."

James is not saying that we earn God's love by doing good things. He is saying something almost the opposite. When God's love becomes alive in us, it begins to show up in the way we live. Compassion is faith becoming visible.

That brings us to Jesus' words in Matthew 25 in which Jesus describes the final judgment. The nations are gathered before him, and the sheep are separated from the goats. And what is the measure? Not theological sophistication. Not how many Bible verses we memorized. Not whether we always said the right thing. Not whether we belonged to the right denomination.

Jesus says: "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. I was naked and you gave me clothing. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me." And the righteous are puzzled. "When did we see you hungry?" "When did we see you thirsty?" "When did we see you a stranger?" "When did we see you sick or in prison?" And Jesus answers: "Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

There is something extraordinary about that teaching. Jesus is so empathetic that he identifies himself with the person in need. The hungry person is not simply someone we are helping. The stranger is not simply someone we are welcoming. The lonely person is not simply someone we are comforting. Each of them bears the face of Christ.

Sometimes I think the first act of compassion is simply learning to see. We live in a world that gives us endless opportunities not to see. We can scroll past a story about homelessness. We can turn away from a person asking for help. We can avoid the uncomfortable conversation about poverty or racism or immigration or loneliness. We can tell ourselves that someone else's suffering is complicated, that someone else should deal with it, that we don't have enough time, that it's not our problem, that we wouldn't know what to say.

And sometimes those things are true. The problems of our world really are complicated. No individual person can solve them all. But Jesus does not ask us to solve everything. Jesus asks us to see. To notice. To allow another person's humanity to reach us. Compassion begins when another person's suffering is no longer merely their problem. It becomes something that touches our hearts. Theologian Henri Nouwen once wrote that compassion means "suffering with." That is an important distinction.

Pity can keep another person at a distance. Compassion draws us closer. Pity says, "That's terrible." Compassion says, "How can I stand with you?" Pity may write a check. Compassion asks, "What does love require of me?"

And sometimes the answer is a check. Sometimes it is a sandwich. Sometimes it is a phone call. Sometimes it is a ride. Sometimes it is listening for an hour. Sometimes it is advocating for someone who does not have a voice. Sometimes it is sitting beside someone in a hospital room. Sometimes it is protesting. Sometimes it is voting. Sometimes it is welcoming the person everyone else has overlooked. Sometimes it is simply saying, "I see you. You matter. You are not alone."

Think about the needs we encounter today. A child goes to school hungry. A neighbor is caring for an aging parent and is exhausted. A young person is struggling with loneliness and wonders whether anyone would notice if they disappeared. A refugee arrives in a new community knowing almost no one and speaking very little English. A family loses everything in a fire. An older adult goes days without meaningful conversation. A person living on the street is

treated as though they are invisible. A prisoner is remembered only for the worst thing they have ever done. A person grieving a spouse discovers that, after the funeral, the phone stops ringing.

These are not abstractions. These are human beings. And Jesus says: I am there.

This is where James becomes especially challenging. It is relatively easy to say, "I'm praying for you." It is harder to ask, "What do you need?" It is easy to say, "Someone should do something." It is harder to ask, "What can I do?" It is easy to feel compassion for people who are far away. It is harder when compassion requires us to cross a street, enter a shelter, sit with someone who makes us uncomfortable, listen to someone whose experiences are very different from our own, speak out against injustice, or change a habit that has always been convenient for us. James reminds us that compassion cannot remain merely an emotion. Compassion moves.

There is another reason service matters to our spiritual lives. When we serve, we discover that the boundaries we have drawn between "us" and "them" are often much thinner than we imagined. A number of years ago, Baylor University's School of Social Work studied volunteers from Protestant congregations and found that many volunteers described their service as deepening their faith. One of the factors associated with spiritual growth was the extent to which people moved beyond familiar settings and encountered people whose lives were different from their own.

That makes sense. We can talk about compassion in the abstract. But eventually compassion asks us to meet someone. A person. A face. A story. And when we meet that person, something happens. The person we thought we understood becomes more complicated. The stereotype begins to dissolve. The stranger has a name. The person we feared has a story. The person we thought was different from us turns out to share our hopes, fears, disappointments, laughter, and longing for love. And sometimes, in that encounter, we discover that Christ is there.

So what does all of this mean for those of us who seek to be faithful followers of Jesus? First, start with what is already in your hands. What gifts has God given you? Are you musical? Sing. Do you have a car? Give someone a ride. Do you enjoy cooking? Cook for someone who needs a meal. Do you love children? Mentor one. Do you enjoy teaching? Share what you know. Do you have financial resources? Give generously. Do you have time? Give some of it away. Are you a good listener? Someone desperately needs that gift. Are you good at organizing? There are ministries that need you. Are you good with tools? Build something. Are you good with words? Write letters to people who need encouragement. There is no gift too ordinary to be used by God.

Also, occasionally choose a form of service that stretches you. If you always serve people who are just like you, try serving people whose lives are different from yours. If you are comfortable working behind the scenes, try meeting the people your work supports. If you usually give money, give some time. If you usually give time, perhaps learn more about the larger systems that create the needs you are trying to address. If you are comfortable talking, try listening. If you are comfortable leading, try serving. And if you feel a little nervous, don't

OUR VALUES: SERVE COMPASSIONATELY
OCTOBER 11, 2026

assume that nervousness means you shouldn't go. Sometimes it means God is inviting you to grow. There is one more thing we need to remember. Christian service is not about being a hero. We do not serve so that people will admire us. We do not serve so that we can feel superior to the people we help. We do not serve because we are the people who have all the answers and they are the people who need us.

We serve because we are all recipients of grace. We serve from a posture of humility. And sometimes, if we are paying attention, we discover that the person we thought we were helping is helping us. The person who receives the meal may teach us gratitude. The person who receives the ride may teach us trust. The person in the hospital may teach us courage. The person experiencing homelessness may teach us perseverance. The person who has been excluded may teach us what welcome really means. The person we went to serve may become the person who touches our lives.

That is the mystery of Christian service. We go expecting to give. And we discover that we receive.

James says, "Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." Those are strong words. But perhaps we can hear them not simply as a warning, but as an invitation. James is inviting us to a faith that is alive. A faith that gets up. A faith that notices. A faith that crosses the street. A faith that makes a phone call. A faith that sets another place at the table. A faith that says, "You don't have to go through this alone." A faith that turns compassion into action. A faith with hands and feet. A faith that looks at the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the sick, the prisoner, the lonely, the forgotten—and sees not a problem to be solved but a person to be loved. And then Jesus says something even more astonishing: "When you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me."

May it be so. Amen.