Putting Flesh on Gratitude

November 22, 2026

If you've been around church for a while, you've probably heard the word "parable." Parables are simple stories, designed to illustrate a moral lesson. Jesus spoke in parables all the time.

Today's parable comes to us by way of a fellow who goes by the rather impressive name of Reverend Earl Lee-Joe Bubba Ray Jenkins III. He's actually a comedian who makes observations about church life.

It seems that somebody had accidentally printed a man named Walter's phone number in the church bulletin as the church's new prayer line. Walter wasn't a member of the church. He wasn't even a churchgoer. But when people started calling, he answered. And when they shared their prayer requests, he began writing them down on a legal pad and praying for them every morning and every night. This went on for months.

Eventually, the pastor went to meet Walter and thank him for answering the phone. They wound up talking for nearly four hours.

Walter told him that he had gone to church for years. Sunday mornings, Sunday evenings, Wednesday nights. He read his Bible. He listened to the preaching. He knew his way around church.

But he had also watched some of those same church people be downright hateful the other six days of the week. As Walter put it, "If you can be hateful six days a week and all church teaches you is how to look like a good person on Sunday, something's broken."

Walter had experienced some profound heartbreak in his life. His wife died of cancer when their three children were all under ten. His daughter eventually struggled with addiction and disappeared from his life. And when he turned to his church for help, what he got were easy answers. "God has a plan." "God's ways are higher than our ways." "Let go and let God." Then he realized that they had spouted the same platitudes when his wife died.

Walter needed more than that. He needed somebody to sit with him in his grief. Somebody to listen. Eventually, Walter stopped going to church. But he never stopped trying to live like Jesus.

And here's the part I love. When one woman called the prayer line to ask for prayers for her neighbor's cat, Walter learned that she was also having trouble getting her front door to close. So he grabbed his tools and drove over to fix it. When another caller had just come home from the hospital, Walter brought him lunch and stayed awhile. The pastor had gone to thank Walter for answering the church's prayer line. Instead, he discovered somebody who was quietly doing the work of the church without ever having stepped foot in it.

That parable comes to mind this week as we read a story Jesus tells about what it looks like when the kingdom of God finally comes into focus.

When God comes in all glory, the questions asked of us are:

- Did you feed the hungry?
- Did you give something to drink to the thirsty?
- Did you welcome the stranger?
- Did you clothe the naked?
- Did you care for the sick?
- Did you visit those who were imprisoned?

As Jesus tells it, the people are bewildered. Both the sheep and the goats ask the same question: "Lord, when did we see you?"

When did we see you hungry? When did we see you thirsty? When did we see you a stranger?

Jesus' answer is that whenever they did these things for the least among us, they did them for him. The people who receive his blessing are the very ones who never realized they were encountering Jesus in the people they helped. They simply saw somebody who was hungry. Somebody who needed a drink. Somebody who needed a little help, and they responded.

Jesus seems to be suggesting that what we believe ought to make a difference in how we live. That the point of all this worship, all this praying, all this studying scripture, all this gathering together as a community of faith, is to help us become people through whom God's love takes flesh. Or, to put it another way, if people encounter us on Sunday morning and then encounter us again on Monday afternoon, they ought to be able to recognize something of Jesus in both encounters.

That's a pretty high bar. And none of us will clear it every time.

But it's worth remembering that, in our parable, Walter didn't have to get everything right to make a difference. He just had to answer the phone. He had to listen. He had to write down a prayer request. He had to pick up his tools and fix a door. He had to bring somebody lunch. Sometimes the holiest things we do are remarkably ordinary.

This calls to mind something Anne Lamott wrote last week about the practice of kindness and compassion. She describes struggling with someone, and realizing that one way to change how you feel about someone is to change how you treat them. This dovetails with our gospel because it reminds us that compassion isn't always something we feel. Gospel compassion is something we practice. Sometimes we begin by choosing to be kind, choosing to listen, choosing to extend a little grace, even when our hearts haven't quite caught up with our intentions.

And perhaps that's part of what it means to follow Jesus. We don't wait until we feel perfectly loving before we act with love. We practice. We keep showing up. We keep trying. We keep making room for the possibility that the person standing in front of us is the image of God right here and now.

Which brings us to Thanksgiving.

Gratitude is often described as a feeling, and certainly there is much for which we can be grateful: The people we love. The food on our tables. The beauty of the world around us. The moments of unexpected joy that sustain us.

But I'd like to suggest today that gratitude is also a practice. What if being grateful means recognizing that everything we have is connected to the lives of other people and this magnificent creation we call the earth? What if gratitude moves us beyond simply counting our blessings to becoming a blessing? What if giving thanks for what we have also opens our hearts to the needs of our neighbors? What if the blessings we celebrate become blessings we're eager to share? What if the abundance we experience helps us imagine a world where no one goes hungry, where everyone has a safe and warm place to call home, and where everyone knows they are cared for? That the love we experience calls us to extend love to people who may not have experienced much of it lately?

Gratitude that never moves beyond ourselves isn't the gratitude Jesus is talking about. And that's one of the things I love about this congregation. Again and again, I see people taking the blessings of their lives and turning them outward. Feeding people. Showing up for neighbors. Making room for strangers. Choosing fair business practices. Advocating for people whose voices aren't being heard. Offering a hand when somebody's life has come undone, because following Jesus means doing something with the love we've been given.

Which brings us to our new members.

Today, we have the joy of welcoming people into the life and ministry of Union Congregational United Church of Christ. And I want to say something about what it means to join a church like this. You're not joining a club where the expectation is that you agree with everybody, have all the answers, or somehow manage to become perfect people of faith. You're joining a community of people who are trying to figure out, together, what it means to live the way of Jesus. People who will celebrate with you, pray with you, learn with you, occasionally frustrate you, and hopefully show up for you when life gets hard. You're joining a community that believes faith is more than something we say. It's something we do. Something we practice. Something we put flesh on and put into action.

And the beauty of membership is that you don't have to do it alone. That's what Paul is praying for in his letter to the Ephesians. He gives thanks for their faith and their love, and prays that God will give them a spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that the eyes of their hearts may be enlightened. Isn't that a great image, "the eyes of our hearts"?

We pray for the eyes of our hearts to be opened because we need more than information. We need more than knowing what Jesus said. We need our eyes opened to recognize where Jesus is showing up in the world around us. In the hungry. In the lonely. In the stranger. In the frustrating coworker and the administrator who never seems to understand. In the neighbor whose door won't close. In the person who needs somebody to bring them lunch and stay awhile. And we need the wisdom to recognize that we, too, are sometimes the ones who are hungry, lonely, frightened, or in need of somebody to show up.

So this Thanksgiving, may we give thanks for the blessings we've received. May we give thanks for the people who have loved us, helped us, encouraged us, and carried us when we couldn't carry ourselves. But even more importantly, may we allow that gratitude to change us. May the eyes of our hearts be opened. May we become a little more generous, a little more compassionate, a little more willing to show up for one another.

May we continue to stretch to be the kind of church where people don't just hear about the love of Jesus on Sunday morning. They experience it on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, too. And may we remember that sometimes the person who shows us what it means to follow Jesus isn't the one standing in the pulpit, or even the one sitting in the pew. Sometimes it's a retired mechanic named Walter, or Joan or Cypress or Avery or John or Carol or Alexa or Mollica, answering a phone call, writing down a prayer, fixing a door, and bringing somebody lunch.

May it be so. Alleluia and Amen.

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Ephesians 1:15-19; Matthew 25:31-46
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