Seeing and Being Jesus in the World

How to Live God's Radical Welcome as a Family

Mihee Kim-Kort

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"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then 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; for 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.' Then 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? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And 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.'"

—Matthew 25:31–40

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Introduction

> Movements are born of critical connections rather than critical mass.
>
> —Grace Lee Boggs, *The Next American Revolution*

If you walk into our kitchen, you will see a large calendar hanging on the wall next to the fridge, and each day is chock full of a variety of activities: church meetings and orthodontist/dentist/doctor/eye appointments, soccer/baseball/basketball practices (and games), school holidays and early dismissals, playdates and birthday parties—they're color coded for each child, although this barely helps. It looks as if a child scribbled all over it with every single marker. And this is just one calendar. We have multiple digital calendars, too, populated by team apps and Google calendar invites, and my spouse miraculously still uses a paper calendar as well. Needless to say, we're running ourselves a bit ragged trying to keep up with the pressures of this life, with kids, with jobs, with aging grandparents, with struggling friends, all in a community in which we hope to be active and compassionate participants.

I know I'm not alone in these experiences. It's not just about wondering how we can keep up with this life. We often lay awake at night wondering how to keep our kids safe, healthy, and content in the midst of a world that seems intent on fomenting fear and uncertainty about themselves and their worth. But even more, we wonder how to instill in our kids a vision of a better world where schools and streets are not sources of anxiety and where they can be a part of building something beautiful in meaningful ways.

This book is about building that something beautiful—together.

Besides being a parent, I'm a writer, teacher, and scholar—one who has for a long time thought about American Christianity, race, gender, and justice. What fundamentally animates all of this as a lifelong project is the desire to work toward a wider belonging and a radical welcome. I'm an immigrant, too; a woman of color, specifically, a second-generation Korean American woman; and I've grown up considering and cultivating everyday practices around what it looks like to make space for *everyone* through watching my parents and my church family care for others. I'm also a Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) minister and happy to be part of a denomination that has a long history of working toward the common good, especially reaching out to the most marginalized and vulnerable in our world. Our 222nd and 223rd General Assemblies (2016 and 2018) specifically challenged the people of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to "embrace Jesus' call in Matthew 25:31–46 to take our living faith into our communities and the world."[1] In other words, my denomination resolved to be a "Matthew 25 church," *Matthew 25* being the shorthand that many people (and I in this book) use to refer to the chapter's final section—a key passage of Scripture in which Jesus tells his disciples what is considered righteous in the eyes of God.

It's perhaps a familiar one to many for the apocalyptic imagery of a king and all the nations and for this invitation:

> "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for 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." (vv. 34–36)

But "the righteous" who were welcomed in wonder, *When did we do these things to you?* Jesus says: "just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (v. 40).

Indeed, "the least of these" are often the focus of Matthew's Gospel, that is, those who are constantly on the margins, invisible or invisibilized by structures of marginalization, oppression, and violence. In Matthew, we are oriented to the world through genealogies and traditions—he gives us right at the start a "genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham" (1:1). But throughout this Gospel, Jesus persistently widens and broadens his definition of family, giving the most unexpected characters to us as an example of God's kingdom (look at everyone from the magi to women to children) or including them in the work (our fishermen disciples). As the church's Matthew 25 Bible study clarifies, this is "not as a group to be pitied, but as a people who are deeply loved by Jesus. They de-center our assumptions about what it means to be a beloved child of God."[2] Jesus helps us see that those who belong to and are kin to God are consistently those we least expect and those who are working for the good of all.

This book is grounded in the vision and work that was championed within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) by then-president of the Presbyterian Mission Agency Diane Moffett and her team, who worked tirelessly to elevate and embed the Matthew 25 vision in the denomination. The church's Matthew 25 movement seeks to grow its work of radical welcome through three specific areas—eradicating systemic poverty, dismantling structural racism, and building congregational vitality—and then to expand outward into three intersectional priorities: promoting gender justice, combating climate change, and resisting militarism. *Intersectional* simply means that social ills do not exist in a vacuum but interact and compound one another in unique ways. There are no single

issues. We are compelled to address climate change if we are to talk about the economic impact on labor conditions for certain populations all around the world. When we talk about labor conditions, we cannot avoid the issue of gender equality and the impact of the heteropatriarchal systems on the LGBTQIA+ community. When we consider the lives and dignity of those who identify as LGBTQIA+, we have to make space for issues of race/racism and poverty. Faithful living asks us to see the threads between it all and to shape a response with and through our whole lives.

Matthew 25 can help us respond as individuals and within our communities by giving us a way to build something beautiful together. And we're already seeing it happen in powerful ways. Thousands of churches and judicatories have signed on to be a part of the Matthew 25 initiative and are engaged in a variety of projects around justice, reconciliation, and care within their communities: efforts around affordable housing, community organizing, educational resources for anti-racism work, ecumenical partnerships toward food pantries, and more.

For instance, at First Presbyterian Church of Stillwater, Oklahoma, Jenna Campbell, director of children and youth ministry, engages families by using the language of Matthew 25 to ask who are the hungry, thirsty, sick, imprisoned, and naked in their communities. She also invites them to consider what faith challenges them to do in terms of meeting these needs:

> In thinking about issues of hunger, the children and youth at First Presbyterian have prepared what they call "compassionate meals" for people facing tragedy and loss. They have also filled the many little free pantries—those stand-alone boxes in the community offering food to the public 24/7—to ensure that families experiencing food insecurity have access to healthy meals. In considering thirst, youth learned about water justice issues worldwide and how to make a difference in the movement to help all people find clean water. And through each activity, Campbell invites the young to keep asking, "Why?" Why is there hunger? Why do people thirst?[3]

As Campbell models, this work begins with questions that turn into conversations that spark the imagination for a world where people are not lacking in food and water. Likewise, Kathryn Green-Ross at Second Presbyterian Church in Indianapolis leads children through a litany that goes: "I wonder what I can do for someone who is hungry. I wonder what I can do for someone who is thirsty . . . who is homeless . . . who is shivering . . . who is sick . . . who is in prison."[4] Matthew 25 gives us a way to not only ask these questions but orient ourselves to the world in such a way that we see hunger, thirst, and the need for connection all around us. It helps us to see and compels us to respond with courage, both as part of a faith community and as family groups at home, which is the focus of this book.

We are called not only to serve "the least of these" but to labor *with* "the least of these" in making this world a place where all thrive and flourish in God's kingdom. Some readers themselves might have experienced or presently experience food insecurity, lack of clean water, trauma from the effects of militarism, discrimination based on identity, and more. These realities are not abstract or distant; they may be part of your daily life or history, shaping how you encounter this book and how you hear Jesus's words in Matthew 25—not as a call to help "others" but as an affirmation that your suffering, too, is seen and held by God.

We often imagine "the least of these" as someone else—someone out there in need of our help—but the truth is, we all take turns being vulnerable, overlooked, or in need. Other readers may find themselves among the least of these in moments of exhaustion, illness, grief, doubt, or invisibility, when what they most need is compassion and community. This work is not one-way or top-down; it is not the strong saving the weak, the older instructing the younger, or the resourced handing down wisdom from above. We do this work *in* community and always alongside and *with* others. So it makes sense to learn with and from some of the most vulnerable in our society: our children.

And so it is at home with family where we practice these ordinary acts of compassion in daily life, especially with children, in whom

these conversations about the possibility of a better world can find grounding in something tangible. The evocative images in Matthew 25 are accessible to all, an entry point into conversations that can shape not only a child's imagination but all of ours as we work together toward good for all. In a family setting, this might look like a child offering surprising clarity, a teen naming injustice, or a parent learning to listen and receive instead of always leading. When we recognize that we all stand in need, we can begin to walk with one another in solidarity rather than charity.

Using This Book

This book doesn't materialize out of a void. I'm not the sole originator of these ideas and practices around parenting, faithful living, and justice. What I am is a parent and a follower of Jesus, and like many of you, I am trying to find inspiration for helping my children follow Jesus through loving others and caring for this planet. This project is a part of a much larger conversation and takes and distills what I've learned from pastors, practitioners, parents, and all those who are doing the work in their corners of the world, as they're able, within their communities. It also specifically engages and integrates the incredible labor of educators, activists, social workers, and artists—their perspectives, their voices—because they're out there doing the most nitty-gritty work of untangling pain and bringing healing to people every day. My approach is also shaped by feminists, feminists of color, decolonial scholars and abolitionists, and disability activists for their emphasis on justice and accessibility.

We don't need a critical mass to do this work. As civil rights activist Grace Lee Boggs said: "Movements are born of critical connections rather than critical mass."[5] We have an opportunity to build a movement by developing these "critical connections" with one another, with our children, and within our families. They are critical because they are important and significant and, more than that, they are necessary for both human and planetary survival because we also see how we are at a critical juncture

when it comes to survival. And I can't think of a better time to start this work or, for many of us, I hope, perhaps continue this work in new ways, because the time is always right . . . right now, here and now, to do the work for and with our communities. This isn't just for Presbyterians but for all of us, for those of us who love Jesus, and love people, and love this world, and who want to instill this same love in our children. And we start where we are, and small, as Mother Teresa tells us, with small things, everyday things with love, hope, and joy right where we are in this world.

My church spent much of the program year in 2022–23 intentionally revisiting the commitment they made in 2018 to the Matthew 25 initiative. During Lent, we focused on the themes of Matthew 25 alongside focusing on a specific issue (earthcare, disability justice, lament and racism, etc.) or within an affinity group (compassionate parenting, men's group, etc.). People signed up for a circle of eight to ten people that covenanted to meet several times during Lent and engage in a Bible study of Matthew 25. The overall goals were framed as a way for us to *connect* with one another, to *engage* the issues in the larger context, and to be a *witness* of God's love and grace in the world. To that end, each chapter in this book will give us a chance to connect, engage, and witness:

- *Connect*: Explore each issue in the context of the Matthew 25 passage and other pertinent biblical texts.
- *Engage*: Look at the complexity of each issue in terms of social, political, cultural, historical, and theological lenses.
- *Witness*: Make space for imagining what taking action together looks like, and we'll talk through practical guidance.

Each chapter will end with an "Activity for Reflection," an "Activity for Response," and a litany for a spiritual practice to tie to our faith that can be used at home or in church or larger group settings. The "Activity for Reflection" invites individuals, families, or communities to pause, notice, and process what the chapter evokes through storytelling, conversation, or contemplation, while the "Activity for Response" offers a concrete way to live out the chapter's insights through action, advocacy, or embodied practice.

Chapter Introductions

The invitation to *see* and *be* Jesus is not just a spiritual ideal—it's the everyday practice of shaping who we are and how we live in the world. It's learning to recognize that following Jesus is not something we do alone or in isolation but in relationship with God, our neighbors, and the communities that we call home. The way we see Jesus in others and seek to be Jesus for others shapes how we treat one another, how we organize our lives together, and how we raise our children to care about justice, compassion, and community. These aren't just social issues or political talking points. They are spiritual practices—ways we live out our faith in real time, in real life, with real people.

The chapters that follow will explore how we can grow as families and communities who reflect God's love and justice in tangible ways: eradicating systemic poverty, dismantling structural racism, reducing the impact of violence and militarism in our world, and more. These may sound like big, overwhelming topics, but they come alive in the small and ordinary choices we make every day: How we gather around the dinner table. How we talk with our kids about the world's brokenness and beauty. How we practice welcome, advocate for change, and live as people who trust that another world is possible—a world that looks more and more like God's peace.

Chapter 1 will introduce the central invitation of Matthew 25: to *see* and *be* Jesus in the world. Drawing from a child's question about how we know God, the chapter explores how we encounter Christ in the faces and needs of others—especially the vulnerable and overlooked. Through story, Scripture, and theological reflection, the chapter encourages a posture of curiosity, compassion, and care as we approach both the Bible and the world around us. It calls readers into a way of life shaped not by belief alone but by loving, embodied action—seeing and being Jesus in the world as community.

Chapter 2 will focus on the complex realities of poverty—not just as a personal or financial issue, but as a systemic and structural problem that touches every level of society. We will

see how poverty shows up in different forms, from material lack—such as food insecurity, lack of housing, or limited access to health care and education—to social and spiritual isolation. Using the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s working definition, we will consider how poverty is sustained and worsened by laws, policies, and systems that benefit some while excluding or exploiting others. Our goal is to move beyond surface-level responses that focus only on what people lack and instead develop a deeper understanding of the root causes that keep individuals and communities trapped in cycles of scarcity and injustice. We will unpack key concepts like economic inequality, wage gaps, generational poverty, and the intersections of race, gender, and geography in these realities. Along the way, we will reflect on what it means to respond not only with charity but with justice—addressing the systems that harm and reimagining communities where everyone has what they need to thrive. In this way, the call to follow Jesus is a call to confront the forces that dehumanize and to build a world that reflects God's abundance, equity, and peace.

Chapter 3 will navigate the reality of structural racism—how racism is embedded in the very systems, policies, and institutions that shape our daily lives. We will begin by defining structural racism as the normalization of racial hierarchy within social, political, economic, and religious structures, and we will go through the terms, narratives, and practices that have supported its existence for generations. From housing discrimination and unequal education to mass incarceration and health disparities, we will see how racism operates not just in individual attitudes but in collective systems that benefit some at the expense of others.

We will also reflect on the role of the church throughout history—how faith communities have both challenged and, at times, upheld systems of racial injustice. Moving beyond slogans and performative actions, this chapter will invite us to consider how anti-racism is not just a political position but a spiritual practice and a work of discipleship. Our goal is to help families and communities recognize the everyday choices we face—whether we

will ignore, maintain, or interrupt the patterns of racism around us. This chapter calls us to live as people who seek not just to be "not racist" but to actively participate in God's reconciling work of justice, dignity, and belonging for all.

In chapter 4, we'll explore gender injustice and the pervasive system of heteropatriarchy—a system that privileges men, particularly cisgender, heterosexual men, while marginalizing and excluding women, girls, and LGBTQIA+ people. We will define these terms and walk through the ways gender-based inequality operates in families, communities, churches, and societies across the world. From pay gaps and gender-based violence to restrictive policies and harmful theologies, we will follow the through line of these injustices and their impact on the daily lives of people simply because of who they are.

We will also navigate how gender inequality intersects with other forms of oppression, such as racism, poverty, and colonialism, compounding the barriers that many people face. The work for gender equity and freedom from heteropatriarchy is not limited to one culture or country; it is a global human rights concern that calls for faithful, courageous response. Our goal is to help readers recognize how these forces shape not only the world around us but also our relationships, language, and practices at home and in the church. In doing so, we seek to cultivate communities that affirm the dignity, worth, and belovedness of all people, reflecting the fullness of God's image in every body and every identity.

Chapter 5 will interrogate the intersectional priority of climate change, not only as an environmental concern but as a deeply moral and spiritual challenge that affects all creation. We will define key concepts like global warming, environmental justice, and climate resilience while also examining how climate change disproportionately impacts communities already burdened by poverty and systemic racism. From air and water pollution in low-income neighborhoods to the rising costs of food, housing, and energy, we will look at how environmental harm is not equally shared.

We will also expand our view to consider the global impact—how climate change threatens the lives and livelihoods of people in developing countries through extreme weather, drought, displacement, and resource scarcity. This is not a distant crisis but a present reality that calls us to consider how our daily choices—what we consume, how we live, and what we advocate for—shape the future of our planet and our neighbors. Our families will learn that caring for creation is not separate from caring for people; the two are deeply connected. In this way, climate justice is part of our faithful response to God's call to seek the flourishing of all life, for generations to come.

Chapter 6 will consider the challenge of militarism, not only as an issue of national defense or international conflict but also as a system that shapes how we think about power, safety, and violence in our daily lives. We will open up key issues such as the global arms trade, drone warfare, military spending, and divestment campaigns that challenge the ways war and violence are often normalized or profit driven. We will also get into the heart of how militarism shows up closer to home, in ways our kids likely notice—through the rise of gun violence, the militarization of police, and the ways fear and control often shape community life.

This chapter will lift up the disproportionate impact of militarism on vulnerable communities around the world, particularly in places where military action, occupation, or exploitation have devastated lives and ecosystems. By looking at both global and local realities, readers will be invited to reflect on how peacemaking is not just the absence of war but the active work of justice, reconciliation, and nonviolence. The goal is to expand our understanding of peace as something we practice in everyday relationships, community life, and public witness. In doing so, we reclaim the call to be people who seek peace not through force or fear but through courage, compassion, and love.

The final chapter will consider the call to nurture vibrant community, what the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s Matthew 25 initiative refers to as *building congregational vitality*. While

vitality is often measured in terms of church growth or programming, here it is framed as the living, breathing expression of faith wherever people of God show up—in homes, schools, workplaces, food pantries, coffee shops, parks, and playgrounds. It is not limited to Sunday worship or committee meetings but extends into the daily, ordinary places where life happens and relationships are formed. Vitality emerges when individuals and families embody God's presence in their neighborhoods—when they bring hope to discouraged coworkers, stand in solidarity with struggling neighbors, or extend kindness to strangers.

This concluding chapter invites readers to see themselves as part of God's ongoing work in the world, not as spectators but as participants in God's justice and love made flesh. Whether advocating for change or simply being a faithful presence in the small corners of daily life, readers are encouraged to live as Christ's hands and feet. In doing so, they enact the shalom of God's kingdom—bringing peace, justice, and joy wherever they are planted. Vitality is not just about what happens *inside* the church but about how the church shows up *outside* its walls—in streets, schools, workplaces, and homes. The church demonstrates vitality through its ability to move past comfortable boundaries while it hears neighborly needs and creates relationships that embody Jesus's love and justice. Every community displays its own unique expression of true vitality because each community possesses distinct historical backgrounds and natural abilities and individual challenges.

The process of discerning God's call to live as the body of Christ in our specific time and location requires prayerful listening together with honest reflection and bold imagination. Following Jesus to the locations he identifies in Matthew 25 allows us to encounter Christ while we serve others who need help. Congregations gain their purpose, passion, and life-transforming hope through these encounters. A church that truly lives as a community consists of people who view through Christ's perspective while expressing love from his heart and performing service with his hands in every mission to which they are sent. Families, in all their forms, are

vital to this work—each household becoming a small but powerful expression of the body of Christ, nurturing faith, compassion, and justice in the rhythms of daily life.

Nothing in this book is meant to be exhaustive or comprehensive, certainly not new, and there are places that may be lacking; not every story could be told in these short pages. It offers one way in to this work, other ways to go deeper, and an opportunity to make intentional space for work that is meant to be transformative, to be faithful. All of this is an effort to provide another entry point specifically for families to consider how to bring this work into their home life. The hope is to create space for lifelong learners of all ages. And it's a part of the larger work of the kingdom, because I'm convinced that we don't do this work alone and that it is ongoing. We do and will be doing it together for the long haul because the love of Christ compels us. Side by side, we can help shape a world that reflects God's justice and love.

1

Seeing and Being Jesus

Introduction

"How do we know God if we can't see God?" asked one of my kids several years ago. We had come home from church and changed into comfortable clothes. We were planning on eating lunch and getting into all the possible activities for the afternoon—bike rides, going to the playground, maybe the pool at Bryan Park. I knew these questions would come, but I still felt unprepared and a little scattered trying to respond in a way that didn't rely on clichés but wouldn't make them lose interest after thirty seconds. I may have stumbled through something like, "We don't always have to see something to know it, that's why we have a lot of senses—hearing, smelling, touching, tasting. Sometimes we know something, and we might not be able to explain it in words; we feel it in a different way, maybe in our hearts." I think I ended with: "We know God because we feel God's love through the people around us."

These moments are a challenge, but looking back, I remember saying something like this in so many words and then somehow feeling comforted myself by the simplicity of this truth in these

moments. I maybe surprised myself a little. I realize now that perhaps these moments were less about articulating something clear and coherent, even convincing for the kids. It was another way to remind *myself* of these little truths: who God is; what it means to see God; what it means to be God's hands and feet and heart in the world, in the most unsophisticated and stripped-down way possible. We know God because we experience God's love through the people around us. And one of my jobs as a parent and caregiver is to help those in my care to discover this beautiful reality.

Jesus's refrain in Matthew 25 consistently resonates for me: "When you did it for them, you did it for me." It reminds us that every act of care—both within the home and outside it—is also an encounter with Christ. This encounter happens in the one receiving and the one offering compassion. We are invited to see Jesus in everyone we care for and to recognize that we, too, are met by Jesus in those who care for us. In following Jesus's example, we become his hands and feet in the world, embodying his love in ordinary, mutual acts of presence, mercy, and grace. This passage from Matthew 25 is not a metaphor or suggestion—it is a declaration that Christ is truly present in the hungry, the stranger, the sick, and the imprisoned. It calls us to take Jesus at his word: that what we do—or fail to do—for the most vulnerable is what we do—or fail to do—for him.

And so, more and more, I see that working in ministry, raising children, being part of a family, and living in community with others are all about seeing and being. Not just seeing with our eyes but perceiving with our hearts, noticing what holds our attention and paying attention to what interrupts us. It is a posture of holy curiosity, of training ourselves to look again, and again, and again. It is not a task we finish but a lifelong practice—a constant seeking out and looking for where God is revealing the divine presence in the ordinary and the overlooked. This is the way of discipleship: learning to attend to the mystery of the Word made flesh, here and now, in the people and places right in front of us. And it isn't one directional, as if being simply follows seeing or if seeing always

leads to doing. The two are woven together, like breath and body, like roots and branches—an embodied, relational knowing that draws us deeper into the life of God. Seeing and being unfold together in every moment as a continuous work of love, witness, and communion.

Matthew 25 is instructive in its method: storytelling and, in this case, especially stories in the form of parables. Storytelling can encourage cooperative activity, value emotional realities, link theory to practice, stimulate critical-thinking skills, capture complexities of situations, reveal multiple perspectives, make sense of experience, encourage self-review, and construct new knowledge.[1] When we enter into these stories, we begin to glimpse how Matthew's Gospel envisions God's presence among real people, in real places, facing real struggles.

The World of the Gospel of Matthew

Matthew 25 is certainly an interesting place to reflect on God's presence in the world. But the Gospel of Matthew overall is an evocative and challenging setting to consider our work with children and families. In these texts, Jesus confronts conflict, ministers at the margins, and redefines who is in and who is out. He lifts up the powerless, challenges empire, and points to God's wider embrace. Scholars explain that the Gospel of Matthew comes from the second generation of Christians, written in the shadow of the Temple's destruction in 70 AD. It likely grew out of a community of Greek-speaking Jewish followers of Jesus, maybe in Antioch, trying to hold together their Jewish identity while claiming Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah. This community found itself in growing conflict with other Jewish groups, especially over their belief that Jesus wasn't just a teacher but the risen One, filled with divine authority.

Matthew tells the story of Jesus from the very beginning, showing him as the son of David, the Son of Man, and the very Son of God, sent to heal, to challenge, and to reveal the heart of God. He roots Jesus deeply in the story of Israel, tracing his line

back to Abraham and lifting up his life as the fulfillment of God's ancient promises. It's clear that this community took their life together seriously, calling one another to live with integrity and faithfulness that went beyond surface-level religion. And yet, in the midst of all the tensions and changes, Matthew dares to imagine a church where both Jew and Gentile, insider and outsider, could find a home in God's wide embrace.

Matthew's Gospel is compelling because it gives us a fuller picture of the life, ministry, and teachings of Jesus. We are invited to engage the story at numerous levels as biblical scholar Anna Case-Winters concludes in her introduction to Matthew:

> At the base there is the compelling story of the life and ministry of Jesus. At a second level this story intersects with the world of Matthew's faith community. Their issues and struggles give shape to Matthew's narrative and his distinctive interpretation of the story of Jesus. Then there is the world of the contemporary readers like us who are seeking insight and inspiration for the life of faith today amid our own issues and struggles. The back and forth between the "then" of the story of Jesus and the "now" of our own stories is an interaction of great power and promise.[2]

Although the world of Matthew's Gospel may seem like another world in another universe, there is much to glean in the Gospel, lessons and perspectives that will help us see our world in fresh ways. As we attend to the story at three levels, we will find resonance and hope in the promises of God in Jesus Christ.

Matthew is organized around five discourses or teaching sessions—the Sermon on the Mount being the first, and the last one (which includes Matthew 25) delivered in Jesus's final days of life. Interspersed between these are the familiar teachings and stories. The parables in Matthew are not prescriptive—they're imaginative. Through very ordinary human interactions and moments, these stories open up a space for us to imagine the possibility of human flourishing that God intended for us. As one of my denomination's Matthew 25 Bible studies explains:

> The stories Jesus tells are like wrecking balls, set in motion to dismantle oppressive systems and challenge the legitimacy of cultural norms. The reaction to Jesus' storytelling will vary, depending on the one who is listening. For those in power, the parables threaten their authority. For the poor, the teachings of the kingdom are good news, revealing God's bias and love toward them. Through these stories and parables, Jesus is asking his followers to commit to active engagement in his kingdom instead of the systems of the world that disregard the needs of the least of these.[3]

Throughout these discourses and stories, Matthew's focus is firmly rooted in one's roots—on family and the relationships between ancestors and descendants. The text makes explicit the line from Jesus to Abraham, King David, and less familiar names, then it connects Jesus to "Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah. So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations" (1:16–17). Matthew wants us thinking in terms of generations via stories of ancestors, dreams of descendants, and all the beautiful ways we're tied together.

Showing Up and Getting Curious

I spend and have spent a lot of time with words and texts—whether it's prepping for sermons and preaching, researching and writing, or keeping up with the hundreds of emails we get weekly from our kids' schools and sports teams.

Like many parents, I try to read what our kids are reading these days for school. Early in the year, our youngest, Ozzie, and I read a book called *Blood on the River*. It is historical fiction based on Captain John Smith; his page, Samuel Collier; the Powhatan Chief; and his daughter, Pocahontas—the story is told through the eyes of young Samuel during the early part of the seventeenth

century. To say that Ozzie was not the most enthralled would be an understatement. So it's a little dry, and it doesn't help that he's not into reading, although he appreciates *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and went through a *Dog Man* phase.

But throughout our time reading *Blood on the River* together, I have seen flashes where something breaks through and actually piques his curiosity. What I love about reading with Ozzie is how it does so much work at so many levels. There's looking at sentence construction, working on vocabulary, working on speech, and practicing comprehension. But the work we do together is pretty simple and straightforward: it begins with showing up and getting curious.

Curiosity is a necessity for the Scriptures, the stories, and God's spirit, and honestly, it informs all that we hold in our lives. This is the larger work of parenting, I think, not only with Ozzie and with reading but with walking through this world. What does it mean to show up and to be curious?

Curiosity is a holy gift—it invites us to wonder, to ask questions, and to stay open to what we don't yet understand, even when it is in front of us. Books and stories open us up to the world around us and can be a meaningful first step toward understanding. In a family, curiosity can be an ongoing, shared practice in which adults and children learn not just from one another but alongside one another. Instead of always having the answers, parents and caregivers can model what it looks like to ask: What was Jesus really trying to teach us here? What kind of world was he dreaming of? Being curious together helps shift the focus from right answers to deeper understanding, from certainty to discovery, and it invites the whole family into a journey of following Jesus with open hearts and open minds.

What showing up might mean, then, is an intentional approach to the persistent mystery and beauty of all life. As we practice in relation to the stories in the Bible and in our lives, we do so not only with *curiosity* but with *care*. How do we show up to *this* passage with curiosity, compassion, and care? What questions might we ask of it? Where do we see its relevance in our daily

lives? The questions below, from the Matthew 25 Bible study, might spark some dialogue with the text.

- Who are the characters in this parable (story)?
- What is their relationship to one another?
- What is the problem?
- Who responds to the problem in the right way?
- What is the mistake made by those who respond in the wrong way? [4]

The parable in Matthew 25:31–46 is an open door. It is meant to open us up to the endless possibility of what it means to be human, what it means to follow God, what it looks like to care and connect with one another, and how we do this work in our everyday lives: as individuals, as a church, as a neighborhood, and as a family. It opens up a space for us to discover the possibility of our own story *in* God's story. It shows us a way to embody the bold and beautiful promises of God in all our stories.

Connecting to Matthew 25

Matthew 25:31–46 paints a picture that feels at first like a final exam—sheep on one side, goats on the other, each receiving the results of their life's work. But as the scene unfolds, it's less about getting the right answers and more about the kind of life one has lived, often without even realizing it. Both groups seem surprised. *When did we see you hungry? When did we visit you?* The shock here is important: the ones who served didn't do it to be noticed or rewarded; they simply acted out of compassion. Jesus turns their ordinary acts of care into sacred encounters, revealing that every moment of kindness is, in fact, a meeting with the divine. What seems like a simple story of separation is a parable about attention—about seeing Christ hidden in plain sight among the vulnerable and the overlooked.

The parable encourages us to discover the holy and sacred, indeed the divine, in everyday objects like bread and water and

shelter and presence, instead of within religious rituals or theological concepts. Jesus examines their love through practical actions instead of testing their beliefs about doctrine or their attendance at religious services. The "least of these" take their place at the center of the story without needing correction because they embody the presence of Christ in our midst. God appears in unexpected places according to this revelation, which challenges our conventional understanding of power and importance. The kingdom of God emerges through small acts of mercy that create effects that extend beyond our visible reach. This passage encourages us to observe with wonder and care while trusting that Jesus appears in every human interaction. We can believe that every encounter holds the possibility of meeting Jesus face-to-face.

Writer Matthew Myers Boulton says,

> What is following Jesus for? It's for entering the kingdom of God. What does such "entering" look like? It looks like action: feeding, giving, welcoming, clothing, caring, and visiting. Are more explicitly "religious" actions important? Yes—but they are not ends in themselves. They are ultimately for the sake of tangibly generous, compassionate acts of love and mercy, both individually and communally.[5]

We are invited to rethink salvation not as a private transaction between the individual and God but as something revealed in how we live in community with others, beginning (but not ending) with those nearest to us—our families. This pushes against the idea that faith is just about believing the right things or making sure we have a salvation ticket to heaven someday. Instead, Jesus connects eternal life to a life of love—love that takes on flesh and blood and bone in the way we together care for those who are hungry, lonely, sick, or forgotten. The surprise of both the sheep and the goats reminds us that this isn't about performance or recognition; it's about becoming the kind of people who instinctively move toward mercy. This is salvation with skin on—faith that shows up in bodies and relationships, in systems and structures, in choices

both big and small. It's the kind of faith that refuses to separate spiritual life from everyday life, because in God's kingdom, they are one and the same.

Taking Our Living Faith into the World

A first glance or reading of our key Matthew 25 passage seems to suggest a framework of insiders and outsiders: sheep and goats, those who fed and cared for the least of these and those who did not, and those who have inherited God's kingdom and those who are excluded from it. It follows a pattern found in the two parables that come before it. First, there is the parable of the ten bridesmaids (vv. 1–13), in which Jesus tells a story about ten young women waiting for a wedding. Only five bring extra oil for their lamps, while the others run out and miss the arrival of the bridegroom. Then there is the parable of the talents (vv. 14–30), where a master entrusts three servants with different amounts of money while he is away. Two invest and double their share, but one hides it out of fear of being rebuked. The parables here give us a clear picture of what it means to be ready and to watch or be responsible with our gifts.[6] The contrast of those who do or don't (not only here in these specific parables but throughout the Gospel of Matthew) is an ancient conventional device that comes from Wisdom literature. The genre has to do with morals, behavior, ethics, and principles for living, not simply for its own sake but for the sake of being and living in community.

Matthew 25, then, gives us another way into how we might live our faith. The story may seem mysterious and closed off, a bit of wisdom from an ancient time that seems far removed from our own lives, but when we show up to the text, with curiosity and care, and listen for the questions it is asking us or asking of us, we may begin to discover how Jesus's teachings of love and light come alive in us and our communities. That question comes directly from the words in the story for me: *Who are the least of these?* To attend to this question regularly helps me to attend in mind, body, and spirit to the possibility of the answer that

might emerge around every corner—a phone call, a stranger in the coffee shop, a neighbor walking toward me on the sidewalk, someone shopping in the same aisle in the grocery store.

But there's another question, though less explicit, embedded in the passage: *What does it mean to pursue God's peace in the world?*

> The Matthew 25 vision builds from the theme of wholeness or peace—shalom in the Hebrew text and eirene in the Greek—and orients us toward what we are *building, cultivating, and creating with God* in lives and communities. . . . At its core, Matthew 25 is about the healing and restoration of relationships, systems, and societies that reflect God's justice and love. . . . Matthew 25 seeks to embody wholeness in action.[7]

Reading Matthew 25 as a story about wholeness and peace is especially compelling to me as we think about how we might love and serve God in the world and help our families to do so too. It gives us language and imagination for raising families—children and adults—who look beyond themselves in order to be attentive to the needs of others.

It invites us to ask not only what kind of world we are leaving to our children but also what kind of people we are forming for the world. And it reminds us that this work starts where we are—around our own kitchen tables, in our schools, churches, neighborhoods, and in our daily routines—building a life that looks more and more like God's peace.

Living our faith, then, is not about arriving at the right answers or securing a spot on the so-called right side of the story. It is about allowing the mysteries and questions themselves—questions like, "Who are the least of these?" and "How do we pursue God's peace?"—to shape us together. It is about staying open to the possibility, listening and living in such a way that we expect to encounter Jesus not in places of power or prestige but in the faces and stories of those who are overlooked or simply made invisible. It is about practicing attention together and

using curiosity and compassion in the ordinary moments of our lives to learn to see the holy in a neighbor, a stranger, and even ourselves.

It is about choosing, again and again, to be people who not only carry God's welcome into the world, wherever we find ourselves, but embody God's welcome. Matthew 25 reminds us that faith is not something we cultivate and create for ourselves, our hands gripped tightly around it out of fear, but something we give away freely, generously, and hopefully. Living our faith means living with open hands and open hearts, for the sake of the world God so loves. It is a life we practice together as families and as communities, becoming God's brave kingdom of joy, justice, and peace.

Seeing Jesus: On the Margins and in Our Neighbors

It's an apocalyptic image, a strange and intense one right in the middle of this discourse, and quite different from the other parables in Matthew—Jesus, seated on a throne of glory, gathering all nations before him, separating them like a shepherd divides sheep from goats. The scene in Matthew 25:31–46 reads like a final reckoning, but at its heart, it holds something far more intimate: an invitation to look again. To see the face of Christ not only in the triumphant image of a king but in the faces of the hungry, the stranger, the sick, and the prisoner.

This is where the story shifts from grand judgment to the ordinary. This is where the kingdom of God draws near, not through spectacle or status, but through the simple, often unnoticed moments of human need and human connection. And the shocking revelation of the text is that the ones who are blessed, the ones who are called righteous, didn't even know they were serving Christ when they offered food, water, shelter, or care. They simply showed up, again and again.

This is the practice of seeing Jesus—in our neighbors, in those on the margins, in the people and places we are tempted to simply glance over. It begins with showing up, fully present

to the moment in front of us. We live in a time when it is all too easy to be distracted, to move through life half attentive, eyes down, hearts guarded. But Matthew 25 calls us to resist that drift toward disengagement to live the kind of faith that pays attention and to ask with curiosity, "Who is God placing in my path today? What need is emerging before me, waiting to be noticed? What do these needs point to in the bigger scheme of things? What is my role? What are my gifts?"

This kind of seeing requires us to slow down. It calls us to listen—not with the intent to fix, flaunt, or flatter, but with a willingness to be changed by what we encounter in our daily lives. It invites us to draw near with compassion, not standing over others as saviors or judges, but standing with them as fellow human beings, as siblings in God's family.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s Matthew 25 initiative puts this invitation into action through its three core commitments: building congregational vitality, dismantling structural racism, and eradicating systemic poverty. Though they are not explicit in the Matthew 25 passage, they are present and pertinent to our contemporary moment. These aren't abstract goals; they are deeply relational. They are about how we show up in our neighborhoods, how we listen to the voices that have long been silenced, how we open our hearts and our communities to the work of healing and justice. Building vitality is not about filling pews or balancing budgets; it's about becoming communities that are alive with the Spirit of God—places where people are seen, valued, and sent out to live their faith in the world. Dismantling racism means listening to the painful truths of our history and our present and choosing to be part of God's work of liberation and repair. Eradicating poverty means moving beyond charity to solidarity by building relationships that affirm dignity and advocate for systemic change.

All of this requires a posture of openness. We cannot see Jesus if we have already decided who is worthy of our attention and who is not. We cannot love our neighbors if we are looking only for the ones who look, think, or live like us. The story in Matthew

25 reminds us that Christ comes to us hidden in the faces of those the world often ignores. And so we practice seeing—not just with our eyes, but with our hearts. We practice showing up, listening, and being open to the surprising ways God's grace breaks into our lives through the people around us. We practice curiosity and compassion, trusting that every encounter holds the potential for connection, transformation, and love.

This is the call of Matthew 25. This is the life we are invited to enter into as a community. A life in community that looks for Jesus not on a distant throne but in the faces of our neighbors and on the margins where God's people embody and enact the kingdom of heaven in radical ways.

Being Jesus: Saved to Serve

The invitation to *be* Jesus in the world is not about becoming saviors or heroes. It is about embodying the love, justice, and mercy of Christ in the ordinary and often overlooked spaces of our daily lives. While *seeing* Jesus calls us to recognize the presence of Christ in others, especially in those who are vulnerable or marginalized, *being* Jesus invites us to live as his hands and feet in the world. This is not a performance or a way to earn spiritual status. It is a response to grace.

We are saved not just for our own comfort or security but so that we might participate in God's ongoing work of healing and reconciliation. This is what Jesus makes clear in Matthew 25:31–46. What we do matters to God. How we treat others reveals the truth of our faith. Jesus ties himself completely to the well-being of those the world often ignores—the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the sick, the imprisoned. In other words, to love Jesus is to love the people he claims as his own. This is the heart of the Matthew 25 invitation: to live in such a way that our lives bear witness to the good news—not in word alone, but in action.

The Matthew 25 vision names three specific ways we are called to live this out together: by building congregational vitality, dismantling structural racism, and eradicating systemic poverty.

These are not isolated goals or optional add-ons to the life of faith. They are deeply connected to the gospel itself—the good news of God's righteousness, justice, and peace for all. When we welcome others, we welcome Christ. When we bring together people who have been divided by systems of injustice or fear, we are participating in God's reconciling work. And when we offer ourselves in service to the most vulnerable in our neighborhoods and communities—whether in rural towns or urban centers, among the young or the aging—we are stepping into the life Jesus calls us to live.

There is no single way to do this work. The Spirit moves in countless directions, stirring up creativity and compassion in every corner of our lives. From supporting affordable housing initiatives to planting community gardens, from advocating for equitable education and employment to walking alongside those who are seeking healing from addiction or mental illness, from feeding neighbors to pursuing systemic policy change—every act of compassion matters. Make no mistake, Jesus is calling us to perform ordinary acts of love every day. And in doing so, we join in Christ's mission to proclaim release to the captives and good news to the poor.

Yet living this way requires us to let go of the idea that service is something extra we add to our lives when it is convenient or easy. Being Jesus in the world asks something deeper of us—it calls us to reshape our imagination about what it means to be human, to be church, to be family. It calls us to move beyond a charity mindset that keeps people at arm's length and toward a posture of solidarity that draws us into relationship and mutual transformation. To serve in the way of Jesus is not to stand over others with our resources or solutions but to stand alongside them with humility and hope. It means being willing to enter into the messiness and vulnerability of real life—not with quick fixes or easy answers but with hearts open to listening, learning, and loving. It means showing up not just once, but again and again, building relationships that reflect the very heart of God. This kind of service shapes us just as much as it supports others.

It draws us deeper into God's vision of community where all belong, all are valued, and all have something to give and receive.

In the end, this is what it means to be saved to serve. It is to live a life that is not centered on ourselves but on the flourishing of the whole community—on the dignity and well-being of every neighbor. It is to recognize that every act of justice, every moment of mercy, every choice to extend welcome is part of God's larger story of redemption and hope. The work is never finished, and it rarely looks glamorous. But it is holy work. It is the work we are called to do, not as a burden, but as a joyful response to the love we have first received in Jesus Christ.

And it begins right where we are—around our own tables, in our neighborhoods and schools, in our churches and workplaces. We are called together to take our faith off the page and into the world. We are called to live not just as those who see Jesus in others but as those who seek to *be* Jesus for others—offering our lives as a living witness to God's justice, love, and peace for all people. Matthew 25 teaches us: *when we welcome others, we welcome Christ*. Welcoming others is not simply a nice gesture or a polite habit; it is a sacred act that brings Christ into our lives and communities through our hospitality. Jesus teaches us that every act of hospitality contains sacred potential when he says "I was a stranger and you welcomed me." Sometimes it looks like opening our door to a neighbor, making room at the table, or pausing to really listen to someone's story. Jesus does not require us to perform extraordinary actions for his salvation. Jesus teaches us to practice compassion through our daily choices, because these small acts will transform us into loving people.

Whether it's delivering a meal, advocating for justice in our schools, offering a word of encouragement, or simply choosing to see and value someone who feels invisible—these everyday acts are how we live our faith. The kingdom of God grows within us through the practice of ordinary love in our everyday lives rather than through grand actions. Following Jesus means living in a way that transforms our welcome into God's welcome and our compassion into a living manifestation of Christ's peace for the world.

Activity for Reflection

"Who Is the Least of These?" Collage or Drawing

Using magazines, newspapers, or simple drawing materials, invite family members to work together on a collage or series of drawings that represent "the least of these" in your community or the world. As you work, discuss who Jesus might be naming in this parable today—those who are hungry, lonely, new to your school, struggling in your city, or suffering in other parts of the world. Hang the artwork somewhere visible as a reminder that these neighbors matter to God and to you. End with a conversation about how seeing leads to doing.

Activity for Response

Care Kit Assembly and Delivery

As a family, put together small care kits for people who might be experiencing homelessness or hardship. Include items like snacks, socks, toiletries, hand wipes, water bottles, and a handwritten note or prayer. Keep a few kits in your car or bag to hand out when you meet someone in need. Make it a practice to pray together before giving away the kits, asking God to bless the person who receives them, even if this is a quick sentence before rolling down your window at the intersection. Reflect together as a family afterward on what that person's life might be like and what it means to see and serve Jesus in the form of that person.

LITANY FOR SEEING AND BEING JESUS

Leader: When we see hunger in our neighbors,
in empty refrigerators, in food deserts, in children
who go to school with stomachs aching—
Family: **Lord, open our hands to share our bread.**
Leader: When we see thirst in our communities,
in polluted water, in neighborhoods without clean
wells, in people who cannot afford what should be
free—
Family: **Lord, open our hearts to offer living water.**
Leader: When we see strangers among us,
newcomers, refugees, neighbors who do not look
or sound like us—
Family: **Lord, open our doors to make room at the table.**
Leader: When we see nakedness in our cities,
in bodies without adequate clothing or shelter,
in homes without heat, in lives stripped of dignity—
Family: **Lord, open our lives to clothe one another with compassion.**
Leader: When we see sickness in our families and communities,
in bodies, in minds, in systems that deny care—
Family: **Lord, open our arms to tend and to heal.**
Leader: When we see prisoners—
in jails, in detention centers, in cycles of poverty
and addiction, in walls we build around ourselves—
Family: **Lord, open our minds to visit, to listen, to restore.**
Leader: When we feel powerless in the face of so much need—
Family: **Lord, remind us: what we do matters to you.**
Family: **When we feel small,**
remind us that small acts of love ripple beyond what we can see.
All: **Make us people who see, who serve, and**
who believe in your kingdom coming,
on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

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