

# The Bottom Line

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Rev. Jeff Mansfield

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Preaching on:

Matthew 25:31–46

There is a lot of disagreement about the best way to be a Christian. Wars have been fought over it. People have burned at the stake. We've excommunicated one another and broken away from one another. You might imagine that the causes of such violence and discord had to be of the utmost importance, but many of our disagreements are almost too silly to even say out loud: How much water is required for baptism? Was Jesus 50% human and 50% God or 100% human and 100% God? That sort of silly stuff—questions Jesus himself was never concerned with.

How many sermons did Jesus ever preach on the proper way to baptize someone—let alone how much water to use? Baptism is an encounter with the living God—it's meant to be an experience.

That's where the focus should be: What is being experienced? That's what churches exist for—to help people have an experience of God! But for many churches the experience of God has gotten lost behind very banal rules and disagreements over, for example, the quantity of water being administered at baptism.

This process of creating and enforcing a nitpicky orthodoxy is the way that churches kill Christianity—it's how we turn a living, relevant religion into a bunch of stupid, misdirected rules and “beliefs” that have absolutely nothing to do with Jesus and nothing to do with faith.

And so many people today, in this liberal era where you have choices about how you spend your Sunday morning, many people today are not coming to church. How many people do you know who tell you that they don't come to church because they experience God more out in nature on a hike on Sunday morning? And us church people, we sort of roll our eyes at things like this. But what if we took them seriously? If you think about it, of course they feel that way, because out on a hike there is only experience; there are no irrelevant rules about how and what you're supposed to be experiencing.

In order for a church like ours to break through the burden of history in which many churches have alienated spiritual people through nitpicky orthodoxy and to break through the cultural malaise making people feel that church can only be irrelevant to their life and to their experience of God, a church like ours needs to focus its energy on the direct experience of God without arbitrary rules about what is and isn't appropriate in an encounter with God.

And in our scripture reading this morning, Jesus shows us the way. I believe that a church that prioritizes feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, healing the sick, and visiting the prisoners is a church that is prioritizing the experience of God and minimizing the baloney. And Jesus says it right there. This is how you get to know *me*. Because as you serve and live with those in need, you serve and you live *with me*.

In my own life, I heard the call to ministry at 16-years old. I went to Boston University and studied religion academically, hoping that that would sort of scratch the itch and I wouldn't actually have to go through with becoming a minister because I wasn't all that excited about serving in a church because I had also felt the lack of focus on the experience of God in church. Studying religion academically didn't quite do it, unfortunately. I found myself just more and more fascinated by all the ways in which people experience God and what the experience of God can do to a life—it can totally transform it, it brings meaning and purpose and satisfaction.

So, after graduation, still trying to get myself out of ministry, instead of going to seminary, I decided to go to Miami. I joined Americorps and ended up working as an on-site volunteer coordinator for Habitat for Humanity of Greater Miami. And do you think it worked? Do you think I got out of my Christian faith in Miami? No, because again, as I was running away from church, I ran directly into the arms of Christian experience!

Let me explain: Down in Miami, I sometimes went to a liberal Presbyterian church I liked on Sunday. But mostly, and unexpectedly, I found God among the rafters and frames and people of the Habitat houses. Every day was a day of work for God's people—giving families and children a home. I began to understand my work building houses as essentially Christian work, as a Christian experience, and I found my understanding of God's love growing more than it ever had before. I didn't just love the neighborhoods I worked in and the families I worked for—I also worked in and for them out of my love for them. I began to understand that love is an action, not a feeling. We should measure our faith not by what we believe in or not, but by the actions we take and the relationships we build and the difference we make.

If we want to really attract people into our church, we need to prioritize the experience of God. I'm not saying that we don't do this at all. But I think we have an opportunity to grow in our experience of God which will create an opportunity to grow as a congregation. Jesus' words this morning: Feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, heal the sick, visit the prisoners serves as the bottom line of what it means to be a Christian. Are you a sheep or are you a goat? In the end, Jesus says it all comes down to this—our willingness feed, to welcome, to clothe, to heal, to visit. The activities are not irrelevant—they are the foundation of our faith, a cornerstone of how we experience God. If we make these core activities a core part of our mission and identity, then people who desire a Christian experience of knowing Jesus, won't think of our church as irrelevant—they will know that at a minimum they will be called upon to act out the love of God in the world. That's not disconnected from people's lives, that's about deepening the connection to your life, that's about finding real meaning, it's about living a living faith.

My experience is that if you're feeling disconnected from God or from faith, all you need to do is look to the needs of the people who are closest to you. Right here in our neighborhoods, in our area, there is a need for new relationships to solve old problems. And if we're willing to do that, our lives will be full of meaning, full of connections, and full of love.