

**Their God Is My God**  
**Matthew 25:14-30**  
**November 6, 2016**  
**M. Michelle Fincher**  
**Calvary Presbyterian Church**

Last year the world was horrified to learn that 21 Coptic Christians had been executed by Islamic State terrorists in Libya. Called the Copts, this group is the largest Christian community in the Middle East, and one of the oldest in the world. They trace their church back to Saint Mark, who introduced Christianity in Alexandria, Egypt, just a few years after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

These Coptic Christians were taken hostage and executed because of their faith in Jesus Christ. The Islamic State released a video of the killings titled, “A Message Signed with Blood to the Nations of the Cross.” ISIS clearly wanted to send a message to Christians around the world, to residents of what they called “The Nations of the Cross.” Their violence was intended to intimidate and cause fear, thereby, they assumed, weakening faith in Jesus Christ. Instead, in at least one person, it had the opposite effect.

The 21 men who were murdered were working on a construction project as tradesmen. All were Egyptians except for one. He was a young African man, thought to be from either Chad or Ghana. A Greek Orthodox bishop reported that the executioners demanded that each hostage identify his religion. Under threat of death, they could have denied that they were Christians, but they did not. One by one the men declared their faith in Jesus Christ and then each one was beheaded.

The bishop, Demetrios of Mokissos, wrote of the event in *The Wall Street Journal*. His article appeared in February of this year, at the one-year anniversary of this tragic event. In it the Bishop described this crime as “a grotesque example of the violence Christians face daily in Libya, Iraq, Syria and anywhere that ISIS prosecutes its murderous campaign against anyone it deems an infidel.” But as shocking and horrifying as these executions were, the story has an unexpected ending.

The young African man who was with the Egyptians was not a Christian when he was captured. But, when the ISIS terrorists challenged him to declare his faith, he answered, “Their God is my God.”

What a profession! “Their God is my God.” After hearing those words, the terrorists killed him, but in that instant, the young man became a Christian. Jesus, I believe, said to him, just as he had said to the thief next to him on the cross 2000 years ago, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” Bishop Demetrios concluded his article by saying, “The ISIS murderers seek to demoralize Christians with acts like the slaughter on a Libyan beach. Instead they stir our wonder at the courage and devotion inspired by God’s love.”

The bishop is right. We hear this story and we are inspired by the faith and courage of these unsuspecting martyrs. But, it’s not enough to be inspired or even grieved or outraged. We are also left with a piercing question: *Are we living our Christian faith in such a way that people will look at us and say, “Their God is my God”?* Do our lives individually make a compelling case for being a Christian? Does our life as a church make a persuasive case for the Kingdom of God? I do not in any way mean to compare the challenges we face with the threat of death imposed on the Coptic Christians. I am saying that if those men were willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for their faith, *how much more* might we choose the way of self-sacrifice that being a follower of Jesus Christ asks of us?

It is stewardship season and by now you should have received a letter and your pledge card in the mail. For the sake of our visitors and those who have joined Calvary in the past year, you need to know that I absolutely love stewardship season. I’m just weird that way. But here’s why I love it: we just spent all fall on a sermon series that explored the difference between being a fan of Jesus versus being a follower of Jesus, and our giving to the mission and cause of Christ is one of the key ways in which our lives tell the truth about which one we are. You’ll recall we said that fans stay their comfort zone; they keep things shallow, on the surface, at a level that doesn’t ask too much of them. Followers, on the other hand, hear the call of Jesus to “deny themselves, take up their cross” and go where Jesus goes.

When we make the church budget every year, it is not an exercise in dollars and cents. It’s not about our institutional survival. This is where we put in black and white how we intend to be followers of Jesus. It is a roadmap of where we think he is leading us to go and what we believe he is calling us to do. That’s why in the past two years we doubled our mission budget because it was a tangible way for us to follow Jesus to the hungry in our community, as we support the local food pantry. We followed Jesus into the homes of low-income families by supporting a daycare to care for and educate their preschool children, a daycare that was started years ago in our church basement. We heard Jesus calling us to impact poverty not

only in our immediate neighborhood, but also in the lives of our neighbors a little further afield, which is why we donated fresh water wells to developing communities in Africa. At \$1500 a pop, in 2015 we budgeted for one well and ended up giving three because of your generosity. This year we budgeted for two—and I can't help but believe that again, we will exceed that. But, don't just think in terms of those 5 wells—think about what kind of impact we will end up having over the next 20 years if we keep giving 3, 4, 5 or more wells every year. The year we hit 100 total wells given, I'm all for throwing a party!

Our children last year earned money by doing chores and got donations to raise money for two pigs and three flocks of chicks to provide sustainable food sources in developing countries. Our adults were so inspired by the children's efforts that someone threw in two goats for good measure. Generosity begets generosity and our actions say more about our faith than our words can ever do. I believe that if we continue to be courageous and faithful followers of Jesus, we will become the kind of people and the kind of church about which others will say, "Their God is my God."

As Jane mentioned in her stewardship letter, 2016 saw the launch of Be the Kingdom Sundays. One Sunday in April and another Sunday just last month, we worshipped by serving. We packed 300 hygiene kits for distribution by PC(USA)'s Disaster Relief agency, made sandwiches for the homeless, sang for nursing home residents, cleaned up a neighborhood park, painted an apartment for an affordable housing unit, sewed Mended Heart pillows for surgery patients, and made soup for those who become ill or are grieving—these are all ways we tangibly and visibly responded to the call of Jesus to love and serve our neighbors. This time last year "Be the Kingdom" was just a concept, an idea I shared with the Session, believing that God could use it to speak to us and use us to speak to our community. My hope, my vision is that Be the Kingdom will, over time, become one of our core practices of self-sacrificing service, so that when our neighbors think of us they'll want to say, "Their God is my God."

Eagles' Wings is another way we follow Jesus to meet the needs of our community. For 28 consecutive years, we have offered one-on-one tutoring for some of the more academically at-risk students from the elementary school next door. If you have never seen our weekly tutoring program for yourself, I encourage you to just stop by on a Wednesday night and poke your head into the fellowship hall. The buzz is electric, to be sure, but beneath the noise and the activity, 3<sup>rd</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> graders are finding a friend and a mentor in a caring adult who facilitates improving reading and math skills and oversees homework getting done.

In some cases we have had multiple siblings from the same family over a period of years, so the collective impact on reading competency and basic academic achievement and the life skills that develop as a result, can't be under-estimated.

Being a follower of Jesus, as opposed to a fan, is not a one-time decision or act. Followers of Jesus are called to a lifestyle, a lifestyle that makes the Kingdom of God a priority, a passion. Worship is what grounds us in our commitment to this lifestyle, because let's face it, following Jesus is not easy. There are countless things to distract us, to entice us, to pull us in directions other than God's Kingdom. So, as followers, week after week we come together to remember that our purpose, our meaning, our gifts, our very lives are rooted in God.

We are all given numerous gifts—gifts of health, education, talents, families, jobs, financial resources—and the temptation is always present to hoard our gifts, to use them first and foremost for our agendas and aims. Worship reorients us to the truth that our gifts—every single one of them—come from God. We have nothing, we earn nothing on our own. We are simply stewards of gifts that belong to God and which are temporarily and graciously loaned to us. That's why in his story, Jesus points out that we will be asked to account for how we have used what has been entrusted to us.

There are all kinds of reasons to share or not share our gifts. I hope it will never be said at Calvary that anyone ever felt guilty or shamed or coerced into sharing a talent, doing a task or giving money. I also hope no one will ever fail to share a talent or do a task or give because, like the servant who put his talent in the ground, they are afraid—afraid of not measuring up or meeting expectations. One of our primary motivations for sharing what has been given to us is as an expression of gratitude to the Giver. God deserves to be thanked for the generous outpouring of grace and blessings in our lives.

In addition to gratitude, another reason to share our gifts is because we have a vision and a passion for how the Kingdom of God changes lives. Like the servants with five talents and two, we want to put what we have to work so that it will be multiplied into even greater blessing for more people and for greater impact. We want to see people grow as followers of Jesus, to see faith make a difference in relationships, in families, in challenging situations. As we experience the power of Christ in our lives, we can't wait to make that opportunity available to others—so providing worship that opens our hearts to God, offering ways for people to express their talents, creating ways to serve: giving to these things isn't onerous. It's a joy, a privilege; it's worth some self-sacrifice. In fact, it's an honor

to follow Jesus and serve the Kingdom of God by sharing our resources. Because, ultimately, we are driven by no less than a desire to make known the person and work of Jesus Christ in such a way that when other people look at us they'll want to say, "their God is my God." Amen.