

Matthew 10:40-42 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

Rewards

⁴⁰“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. ⁴¹Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; ⁴²and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”

Matthew 11:16-19 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

¹⁶“But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another,

¹⁷‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’

¹⁸For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; ¹⁹the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”^[a]

Will you in your own life seek to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, love your neighbors, and work for the reconciliation of the world?

July 9, 2017 (Ordination/Installation)

Follow, Love, and Work on Reconciliation

Matthew 10:40-42; Matthew 11:16-19

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You may or may not know that, by the Book of Order, it is the Session's responsibility to examine elders-elect for their readiness for Ordination. Of all the Christian denominations who set up rules and regulations for those who can be ordained to offices in the church, ours has been extremely good at setting a high bar, and occasionally making it difficult on those who would like to clear that bar and serve the church. Sometimes it seems a little much.

However, one thing I do like about our ordination process is the list of questions you have printed in your bulletin. It is the list of affirmations that one makes when taking on the role of elder, deacon, or pastor in our denomination. The accountability factor is important. Each person being ordained or installed to a particular job has to say "yes" to these questions publicly in front of the people who elected them. So I've made it my practice in recent years that for our "examination of elders" we simply have a conversation about these questions. Sure, they are supposed to be yes/no answers, but there's a lot to unpack in each of them going far beyond a one word response. So today, I'd like to focus our attention on just one of these questions, but it's a three-parter. Will you in your own life seek to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, love your neighbors, and work for the reconciliation of the world?

Questions have always been important to spiritual growth and development. Stop questioning; stop growing. Seek answers to the deep, deep questions— and likely find a glimpse of God. So rather than just asking the elders, and rather than leaving it to a yes/no response, let's get to exploring these questions, shall we?

Recently, I read an article that Josh Hayden, pastor at First Baptist here in town, posted from a faith based group called “Missio Alliance.” The author, Karina Keminski, a frequent lecturer in Missional Studies was also asking questions, 6 questions in fact that might reveal how well you are engaged in your neighborhood. Her questions mirror some of what this question aims at for us. And as someone engaged in spiritual direction, they are brilliant questions to ask anyone who wants to grow in their faith and make a real difference in their community. So I’m going to take her questions out of order from her article so they line up with our ordination question. We’ll get to both as we go through this exercise.

Rather than asking you “WILL you in your own life seek to follow the Lord Jesus Christ?”, a keen spiritual director might ask you “HOW are you seeking in your own life to follow Jesus?” What did Jesus do that you are now trying to do yourself? This is what therapists call an “open-ended” question. Jesus did a LOT of things! Figuring out what you will choose to do to be “like Jesus” can be a life-long journey. Doctors and nurses may see Jesus as inspiration for their healing ministries. Business leaders might take to heart the myriad of things that Jesus had to say about money. Parents might think about how to raise their children with both kindness and courage. Priests were once called upon to take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience in response to following Jesus. There’s no “one right way” to come to an answer. But for Christians, perhaps there is no more pressing question.

Sure, you can be a casual Christian, and come to Sunday church, and live your life pretty much any which way you please. We all know folks who claim to be Jesus’ followers and don’t seem to know much about the life of Jesus. Their actions are telling that they either don’t know or don’t care what he was all about. I don’t mean to sound judgmental about that. There’s a responsibility

that comes with teaching the faith to do it well, and allow the stories to be what's most important. The Church as an institution is easily as culpable, perhaps more so than any individual.

Which brings me to the first of Karina Keminski's questions. If you're not sure how to answer the big picture question on how you are following Jesus, try this one. Who are you eating with? Jesus was known for sitting down to dinner with some rather interesting characters. Matthew tells us that he was called a glutton and a drunkard, and was scolded for eating with tax collectors and sinners of just about every variety. He joined women in their homes, and when he did, he taught Mary about God. He distributed loaves and fishes to the multitudes. Who have you eaten with lately? What do your eating habits say about how you follow Jesus? You might find it funny to know that I make it a requirement of our seminary interns to eat dinner at my house. It reminds them, hopefully, that their role as pastor will sometimes be to sit down and eat with people – in their homes, at coffee shops, or wherever their ministries take them. I know that there are informal lunch groups here that go out after Sunday worship – a time honored tradition for many folks to deepen their conversation after they have prayed and worshipped together. When I want to know a pastoral colleague better – I invite him or her to lunch. Maybe my circle could stand to grow a bit wider than it is! One of the things I hear most often from people who live alone is how hard it is to eat alone. It makes sense. Eating is somehow inherently a social thing. We like to eat and talk, and when we eat and talk, we sometimes share more deeply than if we have a work conversation or a passing acquaintance. Who are you eating with? How are you seeking in your own life, at your own table, to follow Jesus?

Part 2 of our ordination question, will you, in your own life, love your neighbors? Again, the question really isn't "if" but "how?" It was the question of the curious lawyer, and it's our question too. How do we love our neighbors as ourselves? And who are they? Keminski's question is almost

that exactly. Ask yourself, “How am I loving others?” Again, the answers are going to vary greatly. I’ve often said that the gospel is as easy as and as hard as just that. It’s easy to say – love other people. It’s hard to actually do it – consistently and with energy, intelligence, and imagination – another one of those leadership affirmations. Love requires much of us because it requires everything of us. I can get cranky when I’m hungry and forget to love people. It’s true. There are a million distractions that turn our hearts away from our fellow human beings. Loving the people I live with is an ongoing challenge. But love in scripture is so often described as welcome. You welcome another person, you welcome Jesus. You welcome a prophet, you receive the reward of the prophet. You welcome the righteous, you are received as righteous. Do so much as give a little one a cup of cold water, and you are offering love to those around you. Simple, right?

But then Jesus asks our love to go beyond that. Love the least of these. Love your enemies. If you are going to go deep into the ways of love, it isn’t enough to welcome those who promise you a reward for doing so, it means you ask yourself Keminski’s next question, “How am I paying attention to the least of these?” If our love is going to transform our communities, we have to ask this. It is the mission question taken right into our own backyards. Following Jesus and living in love means that we will pay attention, not only to our own life situation, but to the plight of others who might be struggling. This is us partnering with the YMCA, and the Free Clinic, and Circles, and Ashland Open Door. This is us listening and learning about who our neighbors are. This may mean knowing what it’s like to be a timid Freshman at Randolph Macon, or a truck driver re-fueling off I-95, or a teacher who can’t possibly meet all the need she sees in her classroom. This may mean actually listening to your server at Cracker Barrel or finding out the name of your barista at the “Gathering Place” formerly Ashland Coffee and Tea. Loving your neighbor takes on many, many forms.

And part 3 of our question is a really, really big one, and it seems an impossible promise. Will you, in your own life, work for the reconciliation of the world? What a contrast! In my own small insignificant life, can I even entertain making the promise that I will work for the reconciliation of the world? How do I do that? As a pastor, as an elder, how is THAT my job? Well, it is. I know you think it's about making hospital visits or voting on budgets – but it's really about changing the world for the better. If you remember the sermon from a few weeks ago – and I'm not going to call you out if you don't – but if you remember our jaunt through Jesus' departure speech in John's gospel, you might recall that Jesus tells us that we can trust him, and that he trusts us to go and do HIS work. It is our job to bring about reconciliation in the world in whatever parts of the world we can or do influence.

If we're going to be about transforming the world – then I dare say that we have to do two things: 1) talk about it, and 2) do something about it. It means that whether we like it or not, we will be both evangelical and political – two things that raise more than eyebrows in today's world. Keminski's questions on this lead us to where the rubber meets the road and get our faith on the move. She asks us to ask ourselves, “What faith conversations am I having?” and “How is God's rule growing in my neighborhood and my world?” Am I talking the talk and walking the walk of my faith? Those things are world-changing, and in many ways, the church has grown fearful of doing both. Religious leaders are discouraged from making waves, and it's hard to work on the reconciliation of the world and keep the waters calm. Now what this means is that we won't always agree on what to say or what to do. Maybe that's OK. Maybe our effort means a lot. Maybe our misfires and misinterpretations are part of the work of reconciliation as well. Our mistakes teach us, but if we are being bold, mistakes will likely be made. Go forth anyway. Remember that if you have been ordained – your calling is wrapped up in a “yes, I will” answer to this question.

But so far, of our three-part question, I've only gotten to 5 of Keminski's 6 questions for revealing how well you are engaged in your neighborhood. Again, according to her research, our barometer for community ministry is gauged by our answers to the following questions:

Who am I eating with?

How am I loving others?

How am I paying attention to the least of these?

What faith conversations am I having? And

How is God's rule growing in my neighborhood and world?

This is an exceptional list for personal and church-wide reflection, and Keminski's ultimate question reminds us that it is not only for us to do alone. She asks us to ask ourselves, "Am I inviting people to join me?" In church life, we invite people into deeper responsibilities when they are ordained or installed to service. We also draw folks in with how we are known. Wisdom, as they say, is vindicated by her deeds. Mature faith may not always be easy to describe, but it seems as though we know it when we see it. It looks like Jesus, acts in love, and works tirelessly for the benefit of the world. Then others become curious – so do we invite them to learn more? Who will tell the story if we don't tell the story? And these days, it's not enough to invite people to church, or for those who come to church to ask them to become members. The expectation that that will be the norm is fading quickly. How do you, IN YOUR OWN LIFE, invite others on the journey to walk with Jesus? Because it's not about growing big churches, not really. It's about inviting others into a life that has value, and meaning, and purpose, a life that is intimately connected with God, loving toward neighbors, and makes a real difference even in today's world. Will you? And how will you? The answers are up to you. Amen.