

THE MEASURE OF A CHRISTIAN & A CANADIAN TODAY

Isaiah 1: 10-17; Matthew 25: 31-45

Rebecca: So, Harris, what is it that you like about Armour Heights Church?

Harris: Well, I love the worship... The music is phenomenal... Isn't it congregation? (applause)... The preaching and praying is pretty good too I think... I'm sure you agree Rebecca! An unbiased opinion of course! Our kids programming... what creativity! We're doing some amazing things in outreach into the community – besides providing opportunities for learning and deepening our faith, there's programs for seniors, for children and youth... we're reaching out to the most vulnerable through ARISE and Portland Place and Evangel Hall, and even providing camping through Cairn and Camp in your own back yard to any child who wants to attend with money never a factor... I can go on and on and on Rebecca...

Rebecca: That's quite a list Harris. I'm excited by all that too. But what does the bible say is most important? What revelatory insight can focus us on what it means to be the church of Jesus Christ?

Harris: I'm getting the feeling you've got an answer in mind?????

Rebecca: I do. Why don't we begin with our scripture reading from Isaiah.

Reader: Isaiah 1: 10-17...

Rebecca: According to this prophecy, God is really upset. Any ideas why Harris?

Harris: Boy you're really putting me on the spot! Well, it seems God is pretty fed up by all the sacrifices and worship rituals of the people. God even declares that God will not listen to their prayers anymore. Hmm... For all their worshipping and praying and sacrificing to God, the people seem to be neglecting something or ignoring something or missing something that is equivalent to choosing evil over good. Any sense what it is Rebecca?

Rebecca: I do Harris. It's in the very last verse: "Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow."

Harris: Wow! That's really clear-cut. But what does it actually mean? Justice is a big word. What categorizes someone as oppressed? Why are the orphan and the widow mentioned specifically?

Rebecca: Well, Harris, this is why we went to seminary: to dig deeper into the background of the words to understand what's going on. Justice is about doing the right thing. We're here to figure out what justice is and then find the inspiration and courage to pursue it. And Justice begins when we try to figure out who is most oppressed in our society and world. Who is most vulnerable? That's what the orphan and widow represent – those who are most vulnerable. So, whether it's youth on the street exploited by traffickers or those with mental health problems underhoused and malnourished, or those who are poor or sick or disabled... It's those who are misunderstood and judged and harassed by they indigenous or black or gay or transgender, or refugees... It's about women in an abusive relationship or a child in an abusive home... I can go on and on, Harris, but I think you should get the picture by now...

Harris: Wow! Yes I do Rebecca. So, is Isaiah proclaiming that unless our worship inspires our hearts and spirits towards justice and love, and unless our focus of time and energy and money is directed toward those who are most vulnerable, God is not pleased, to put it politely.

Rebecca: Absolutely, Harris! God is upset. The biblical word is “wrath”.

Harris: I like that word: wrath!

Rebecca: But God doesn't stay there. God's wrath energizes, inspires and empowers those who worship God to rise up and direct their passion and priorities so that justice and love toward those most vulnerable becomes the purpose in all our gifts, talents and occupations. Isn't that something?

Harris: It is Rebecca, it is. You must have been an A student in seminary!

Rebecca: Thanks Harris, flattery will get you everywhere... But seriously now, if we're clear through the prophecy of Isaiah what the church's worship, ministry and mission should be focussed on, what's the church's role in helping society find it's moral compass?

Harris: Well, I think you're probably thinking about our 2nd reading in this regard, no?

Rebecca: Right on, Harris, I am. Jesus gives some final instructions to his disciples before he departs in the flesh, and he does so with some parables. Here's the last and most important parable he tells:

Reader: Matthew 25: 31-45

Rebecca: The measure of moral excellence of any society is in how it treats its most vulnerable citizens: those who are lacking adequate food, clothing and housing, those who are refugees, those in prison without making a judgement as to why they're in prison and what they've done. Love doesn't discriminate even though we need institutions in society that protect the vulnerable and hold people accountable for their actions. But we care for the guilty as much as we care for the victims.

Harris: But why should this be the measure of moral excellence?

Rebecca: Because Jesus declares that the way we love and care for the least important and most vulnerable and guilty in society is the way we love and care for Jesus himself.

Harris: Wow! That's a fascinating idea. Even though Jesus is no longer among us in his body, he comes to us in hidden ways like this. In every vulnerable and broken person Jesus is there calling to us to stretch our loving and caring to reach him through our love and care for such human beings. I guess everyone is a child of God no matter who they are and what they've done. But how does that help us measure our nation Canada?

Rebecca: Well, Harris, we're really fortunate to be living in Canada. When we hear the news about what happens in many places of the world in terms of basic human rights and human dignity, in terms of education and health care and minority rights. Last year Canada took in more refugees than any other country. We have lots to be thankful for. But can we do better?

Harris: Well, I guess if you're an indigenous person or a racial minority... or if you're a young person in huge debt for your education... or if your someone in need of mental health support or decent housing... If you're someone affected materially and mentally by our climate crisis... I can go on and on, I think, because there are so many ways we can and should do a lot better. Those of us who are doing well can get complacent and we don't like to hear any criticism of our nation... but those of us who struggle for support and for services can easily experience the gaps and inadequacies. It's easy for us to become selfish as Canadians just focussing on our own well-being and savings account, resistant to any increased taxation that may support a more generous health and education system...

Rebecca: Boy, you have a definite perspective on social issues Harris. But I guess if you measure what Jesus is saying in the parable against the values and actions of our nation, it really does give us something concrete to use as our moral compass.

Harris: It does, Rebecca... But you know, there's one thing I don't get in this parable. Those who are generous in their loving and caring of the most vulnerable aren't even aware that they're loving and caring for Jesus himself, while those who fail to love and care adequately for the most vulnerable also aren't aware that Jesus himself is in the most vulnerable. Is it fair to judge one group and reward another even though neither of them recognize Jesus?

Rebecca: Ah, Harris, your getting to a deeper revelation here. Good for you! Seminary wasn't wasted on you. We learn that asking the right questions and then pondering them is much more important for growth in insight than looking for quick answers. You've learned your lessons... or at least some of them!

You see, if we know it's Jesus we're caring for and loving, we'll be more diligent because he's important and there's reward in serving someone who is important to us. But the purest form of caring and loving is when we offer it to those who don't count in society and don't matter much in terms of their standing or social influence. They're easily forgotten. And the purest form of caring and loving is not only to serve those who matter least, but to do so without even thinking about it as something all that special we're doing. It's become so natural to who we are, we do it without even thinking about how wonderful we are for doing it. People matter to us even though society discounts them and ignores them. This is how we discover where Jesus truly is. This is when Jesus' Spirit has totally transformed our service into gospel love.

Harris: Wow! That's awesome insight and awesome revelation Rebecca! We've learned that a church that focusses on love and justice is a true church and when love and justice is focussed on those vulnerable and marginalized, we live in an amazing society. We're so fortunate to be living in Canada. But as Christians we serve Canada best by reminding ourselves and those around us that we've still got a long way to go in our loving and caring for all... Amen and Thank you!

Rebecca: Amen and Thank you, Harris.