



Matthew 25 Gathering 2017: Anglican Justice and Mercy for Shalom

David Roseberry – September 27, 2017

I'm Dave Roseberry, the executive director of LeaderWorks and the founding rector of Christ Church in Plano, Texas, where I served for thirty-one years.

A year or so before I left Christ Church, I prayed, "Lord, help me to know when it's time for me to release this, and when that happens, help me to just let go." In remarkable ways that assured me that all was well, the Lord responded, and when I turned sixty-one, I went to the vestry and said, "It's time." It was a joy for me to hand that remarkable church over to Paul Donison, an amazing young man. I'll say a little bit more about that tomorrow.

Quite honestly, Christ Church Plano was an amazing place, and the work that was done there was both incredible and difficult, but it was easy street compared to what a lot of you have to deal with, especially in terms of funding and staff and safety and comfort. To walk into a room filled with people who sign up for that sort of duty is so humbling for me, and I'm so thankful to be here. My heart is full of praise.

After last year's event, I went to Christine and said, "We have to do this again," and sure enough, here we are. I knew then that Matthew 25 was getting traction and that we all wanted it to be something significant, and so I offered my assistance in helping to organize that effort. My role, both at Matthew 25 and in the wider church, is to kick-start things, to get things started, and to then help leaders get from *A* to *C* by working through *B*. It's always the *B* that makes trouble.

Our leaders are amazing. They look up and say, "I have a dream," and they paint this grand vision. "This is what I want to do at this church or in this church plant," they say. They're *A*, and that's *C*, and what they really need is a mentor or a guide to help them figure out what *B* looks like. Vision is great, but honestly, insight is greater. You have to have that insight on how you're going to move from *A* to *C*. By God's grace, over the next month or two or three or four, we'll be able to talk about the *As* and *Bs* and *Cs* of Matthew 25, about where we're going together.

You probably don't know this, but I'm here to welcome you to Arizona because this is my home state. My mom moved here when I was eighteen months old. We lived in Nogales, Arizona, right on the Mexican border, where some of you are headed as an extension of our time together. This is an incredible state. I've been all over it, and it's left an unforgettable imprint on me. I love the land and the mountains, and I don't mind the heat. When the brother who spoke a few moments ago said, "Now that it's not hot," I can imagine some of you are thinking, "But this *is* hot." Oh no. It's 118 degrees here in the summertime. It's an oven. We even have sunrays on our flag. And I just put this together yesterday—check out the Matthew 25 logo and the Arizona flag. They both have the same bright red and yellow stripes! Who knew? I didn't design the logo, but there it is.

If you are able to catch a sunset here, you'll want a camera. If you have the ability to get up early and watch the sunrise from the top of the mountain, it'll blow you away. Every day is like that—magnificent sunsets and cloud formations. You don't have to touch up your photos to make them really pop, because the colors are so vivid. It's an amazing place.

We're meeting in Phoenix, which is kind of in the center of the state, and I went to school in Tucson, which is south about 110 miles. Then south of Tucson is Nogales, which is on the Mexican border, and that's where I was raised. Arizona is a very interesting state because it has all these different climates and topographies. In fact, just for fun, I want to show you a couple of elevation points in the state. This might be fun, especially for those of you who are from Kansas where it's kind of flat.

Northeast of us is Flagstaff; that's where Northern Arizona University is. It's a great school, and you can ski there in the wintertime. If you drive from Flagstaff to Phoenix, you're going to drop 6,000 feet in a matter of three hours, as we're at about 1,000 feet above sea level here. In the summertime, it'll be 70 in Flagstaff and 110 or 115 in Phoenix.

Farther south, in Tucson, you start to gain elevation again, so it's always 5 to 10 degrees cooler there than in Phoenix. The town I was raised in is even higher than that, at about 3,500 feet above sea level. The whole state tilts to the southwest. Over in the corner of the state is Yuma, and that's just flat-out hot; it's within an hour or two of Death Valley.

One of the things I want to tell you about Arizona—and this is germane to Matthew 25 and Isaiah 58, I promise—is that it has about 1,500 to 1,800 different kinds of cacti, and I want to give you a little tutorial about cacti. The big ones are easy to differentiate; they're saguaros, and they have a root system that spreads out as tall as the saguaro itself. They are ready to drink God's water when it rains. It doesn't rain that frequently, but when it rains, they can drink up to two hundred gallons in an hour, and they store it in a massive trunk. They grow very slowly, and any saguaro cactus of any size is really old.

Saguaros are beautiful, but you don't want to plant one on your wedding anniversary and then wait for it to grow, because in ten years it'll only have grown an inch and a half. By that point, it has just managed to come out of the ground. Then it starts to really cook, growing about one inch a year. That's it. It won't have a flower until it's thirty-five years old, and it won't develop an arm until it's seventy-five years old, and finally, at age three hundred, it's dead.

This got me thinking about roots and fruit. It got me thinking about the way in which there's an exterior to trees that we can see publicly—we can enjoy trees and sit under their shade—but really the strength of trees is in their roots. A tree grows in a particular direction because it's able to grow its roots in that direction, and it goes in that order, by the way—it grows down before it grows up. If the tree doesn't grow down, it will fall over as it grows up.

Just north of Tucson there's a place called the Biosphere. The Biosphere was an experiment in self-contained community. It was like a pre-planetary-exploration thing. They put two, three, or four people in the biosphere and had them live self-sufficiently, and there are all kinds of stories

about how those people cheated the system and brought in pizza and things like that. But my point is that they had trees in the biosphere that grew up and fell over because they had no root system. They never anchored themselves in the soil, so they just got top-heavy and fell over. If you apply this to the biblical narrative, you might say that God is not merely growing a people to be a blessing out in the world but also to get them to settle their roots down in God's character, in who he is.

In fact, I would say that the story of the people of God, from Abraham to the end of Revelation, is a story of God challenging God's people to grow deep in trust, in faith, and in loyalty. We're also called to worship, yes, but we'll see in Isaiah 58 that it's not just about worship—there's a character issue that God is after when God tells us to put our roots in him. I say here to you, maybe provocatively, that God's love is unconditional on one condition: that you receive it, that you open your life to it. The unconditional nature of God's love is just a concept, a theory, a vapor, until we get to a point where we can trust enough to open ourselves to it.

Many of us read stories in the Bible and wonder, "Why does this law that seem to bind everybody up? Why did Moses come down with the Ten Commandments? Why are there all of these extra commandments? Why is the Old Testament filled with all of these lessons?" One way to look at these questions is that God is developing not just a people *for* him but a people *like* him. He's trying to set up behavioral norms in how we treat each other and how we can embrace one another. These rules are not about competition, not about judging one another as better or worse. These rules may strike us as arcane today, but they were a way of promoting solid, wonderful, protected relationships.

Think about the Ten Commandments, which I'm sure you all know. Four have to do with our relationship with God, one is about our relationship to family, and the rest are about the relationship between you and me. God starts out with that, and it's a series of *don'ts*. In our culture, we don't like *don't*; we don't like authority telling us *not* to do something. But what is God doing here?

I think of it like a parent telling a child, "No, we don't do that in our family. We honor *this*, and we love *this* way, but we don't do those things." That's what we see in the Old Testament, a balanced approach that shows what you do and what you don't do, what's important and what's not important. In that way, God develops the roots, the character.

You can also see this in the dietary rules and cities of refuge and Sabbaths and jubilees. All of these served as ways to teach the people to say *no* to some things and *yes* to others. In these pages, we can hear God saying, "This is my people, and if I'm going to extend the grace I want to the human population through this tribe, they have to get their act together and I have to shape them."

These were our training wheels. Paul shows this when he talks about the law in Galatians, saying, "So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith" (3:24). The law helps us stay upright. It is not there to harm us or spank us but to actually bring us before God.

When I think about Isaiah 58, it's from that perspective. Isaiah 58 was written, as some of you know, seven hundred years before the time of Christ. It's an amazing passage, and it has an integrity in and of itself. What I thought I'd do is just talk it through with you, help you to see the internal structure of Isaiah 58 and what it points to when it points all the way, seven hundred years later, to the heart of Jesus's last sermon on the earth, Matthew 25.

It says, "Cry aloud; do not hold back; lift up your voice like a trumpet; declare to my people" that the time of exile is over? *No*—"declare to my people their *transgression*, to the house of Jacob their sins. Yet they seek me daily and delight to know my ways" (58:1–2). God seems to be saying, "I'm having issues with my people, though I do see them having these religious, law-driven services every day, and I see them expressing delight in knowing my ways." The chapter then continues: ". . . as if they were a nation that did righteousness and did not forsake the judgment of their God, they ask of me righteous judgments; they delight to draw near to God" (58:2). Here, God draws attention to the forgetfulness of the people, and they respond, "Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?" (58:3). This reaction shows that they view their fasting as a lever or a tool. They seem to be saying, "The law says we should do this, so we're going to do it, but cut us a break. We're not doing this for nothing, and yet it's like you're not even listening. We're hoping to get something out of this, but you're not even watching."

This response sort of caught me up short. There's so much during the course of our ministry that can turn us into the kinds of people who think, "Here I am. I showed up. I'm doing the thing you told me to do. Where are you, God?" It's one of the hazards of being who we are. I don't know

your heart, but there have been highs and lows over my thirty-two years of ministry. There have been a lot of great, amazing things, but there have also been too many times that I just said, “It’s over. I have to do something else.”

I began to think about the things in my life that kept me from quitting. I could get spiritual about this and say that it was my calling or the Holy Spirit, and yes, those things are true, but I have to also say—and maybe you can relate to this—sometimes what held me in place was not God’s tractor beam but the public pressure of a gazing crowd and the needy people who depended on me. And those pressures of public ministry have sometimes kept me from dealing with the issues of my own life.

Some of you have financial supporters—how hard would it be to write a letter that said “I give up”? To disappoint your friends and the people you rely on? I’ve sometimes thought, “I will not bring shame on the name of Christ. Christ was not a quitter; I’m not going to be a quitter. I’m going to work my way through this and deal with it.”

I don’t think that’s always the right answer. Echoing Isaiah 58, we sometimes want to be right before God—and before the people who depend upon us—but the work can sometimes make us feel empty inside. Sometimes, and this is really what the Matthew 25 Gathering was about for me, we experience isolation as driven people. We’re in this ministry, we’re driven, and there’s an impulse inside of us that says, “Do it, do it, do it,” and that actually pulls us away from people, because there’s no one to talk to. I’ve been in leadership all my life, and I have never felt

comfortable going to the people I lead and expressing my doubt or worry or sadness or depression. I haven't been able to share with them where I really am, but I have to find someone.

We have this understanding of God as one who sometimes hides and thereby makes us grow in faith, as if we're living on the dark side of the moon, waiting for the light to come around again. We know it may take a while, so we grow our roots deep.

I'm just saying that I'd bet that the people of Isaiah 58 were actually leaders in the religious movements of their day. They sought the Lord. They delivered. They had the fasts. But they had the wrong idea about them. They were saying, "We're going to do this so we get what we want from you. We don't have to listen to God—we've kind of listened to ourselves. We got the answer, so let's fast. Let's delight in the Lord externally, but our hearts need healing."

I think one of the things people who serve in ministry have in common is what I call the case of the anorexic chef—perhaps those of you with children might relate to this. We do not spend our days and our hours attending to our roots, to the things within that make us connected; instead we spend our time preparing the fruit for others. I think that's where Isaiah 58 people are. They love the Lord, they're obedient, and they do things right, but God says they're doing the wrong things. They get so busy preparing the meals for everyone else that their body rejects the meal or they don't have the time to eat it.

God proves this: "Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers. Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist. Fasting

like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day for a person to humble himself? Is it to bow down his head like a reed, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call this a fast, and a day acceptable to the Lord?” (58:3–5). In other words, God looks down on the people and asks, “Is that all you think that I need? Just somebody to do the sackcloth and ashes thing? Do you think that’s the limit of my appeal?”

This passage speaks to those times when I get ready to have my quiet time or prayer time and I’m distracted by the list of things I have to get done that day. “Oh,” I think, “that reminds me of an email I didn’t send yesterday.” The laptop goes up, and an hour later I’m sort of stuck in this endless loop of connection and branch spreading, and the roots are thirsty.

I think Isaiah 58 has an answer for us. God says, “This [is] the fast I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke” (58:6). These are images we know so well as Bible workers. But just look at those four lines as a piece of art right now.

Do you see the progression there? God starts with the easy stuff: “Loosen the bonds of wickedness,” he says. But then he continues: “No, more than that. Open the straps. Don’t just untie them; take them off. No, no, there’s more than that. Actually, take the whole yoke off the person and let them go free. But, no, don’t just loosen the bonds or undo the straps or let the oppressed go free—what I want you to do is to take that yoke and break it so it can never be used again. That’s a fast.”

It's art, what God has put together here, because it makes me realize that everything is headed in the direction of freedom. This continues in the next verse, as God tells us another thing we're to do: "Share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, . . . cover him, and [do] not to hide yourself from your own flesh" (58:7). Do you see the progression? God wants an ever-increasing amount of freedom, security, comfort, and deliverance for God's people. But not only that. "I actually want you to share your bread," God says. "But that's not enough either. Welcome that man into your home. No, no, no. I'm sorry. It's even more than that. If the guy is naked, if he has nothing, will you cover him?" And so God calls us through a series of progressions, from bread to home to warmth, to restore dignity. After all, you wouldn't let a naked person into your home.

And this last line, "not to hide yourself from your own flesh," has scholars going crazy because it means one of two things. Perhaps it means that the people in the passage are related, as relatives are often described as of our own flesh. But this verse also had me thinking of Galatians 3, and that presents another school of thought. We take the yoke off of this person, undo the straps, break the straps, set the man free, and then we say, "No, don't go away. Here's some food. But wait, come into our home. And here's some warmth." And through that progression, we find that the person is actually my own flesh, that there is a connection between that person who was just delivered or rescued and us. That's what God is challenging us to do here in Isaiah 58—to put down the roots.

This is a radical idea that's today embodied in so many of you, but can you imagine what it was like seven hundred years before Christ? Life was cheap and ethnic wars were waged all the time, and here is God saying, "No, no, no. Those people you've enslaved? Set them free, and then bring them home because they're like you. They're flesh and blood."

As we deepen our sense of connection with other people in this position, God gives this promise: "Then shall your light break forth like the dawn" (58:8). That's what we want, after all. That is what we're after. We're after a whole new kind of life, a new day. Well, then, your light shall break forth like the dawn. That's what causes the sun to come out.

The passage continues: "And your healing shall spring up speedily" (58:8). And again, we're dealing with a progression. It's not just the light breaking forth like the dawn, and it's not just a new day for the world; it's a new day for *me*. Healing springs up in *me*. The sun doesn't just come up out *there*; it comes up in *me*. I feel like I'm connected to the power and person of the universe.

Then not only is this light *within* me, but the verse says "your righteousness shall go forth *before* you; the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard" (58:8). Wherever I go, this sense is going to make me the person God wants me to be. Righteousness will go before me, and the glory of the Lord will go behind me. Do you see the progression again? This is the brilliance of poetry in the Old Testament. It's unmistakable.

It is not just to loosen; it's to untie. No, it's to set free. No, it's to break. Then, no, don't go away. Come here. Here's some bread. Come into the house. Come into the warmth, because we are like brothers and sisters. We're family. We're the same flesh. And then what happens when we develop that kind of a root system? Well, then the dawn breaks. It's a new day, and not only out there, but I feel this surge of power, as Jesus would say in John chapter 7. The fountain just comes right through me.

The righteousness goes before me, and the glory of the Lord has my back. Who doesn't want that? That is the vision of Isaiah 58, and if you will very briefly jump with me into Matthew 25, you'll see that this is what the last sermon of Jesus is all about.

The king is going to stand right there on the Mount of Olives, and he's going to separate people, like a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and say, "Come, blessed of my Father, because I was *this* and you did *that*. I was naked and you clothed me. You came to me as if it were Christ himself. The same flesh." Christ who shared our flesh now tells us to go out and do these things, because as we do these things to the least of them, to the flesh who are like us, we're actually doing it to the flesh who comes to us.

This is not just a task list of things to do; it's actually a way to live, a way to receive the glory. "You share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor..."—again, these are the things Jesus is saying in Matthew 25—"Then shall your light break forth. Come and enter eternal happiness," which is the promise of Matthew 25.

I think what I'm saying is that the work we are called to do is actually root work on ourselves. It's developing the character and the compassion and the confidence that these people we reach out to are people of our own flesh. I don't have that skill myself. I look at the work you do, and as I said earlier, I'm deeply humbled by it. May the Lord deal with me and move me in that area.

I think the good news here for you workers is that it's not in spite of the work you do that your heart is open to what God would want from you. It's not in spite of the work that you do that your branches are full and there's fruit on your limbs and you have a deep root system. It's not in spite of the work; it's *because* of the work. The work itself has allowed you to express yourself in ways that are consistent with Matthew 25 when it refers back to Isaiah 58.

So, returning now to my sunshine state, the Grand Canyon state, the beautiful state of Arizona, "Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you." I'll make it a prayer—may the glory of the Lord, then, Father, be our rear guard.

Father in heaven, thank you so much for your Word. How rich, how wonderful, how ancient yet relevant, how mystical and clear. Thank you for the privilege of peeking over the shoulders of giants who wrote it and that we can come then, as we have in Christ, to the one who fulfilled it and then place ourselves in the power of the Spirit so we can proclaim it. May it live in our hearts. All of this we pray in Jesus's name. Amen.