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**Title:** The Discipleship Gene: Caring

**Date:** September 29 & 30, 2018

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**Scripture:** [Matthew 25:31-35, 37, 40-41, 44-45](#)

**Text:** [Acts 4:32-37](#)

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I want to ask you a question. It's an important question about your life. Life is filled with big questions, isn't it? You know this and probably could come up with a list of the most important questions like, "Who am I?" It may be the first question that we think of. Rene Descartes thought so when he suggested that through thinking,

identity emerges. *Cogito Ergo Sum*, he wrote. I think, therefore I Am. You've asked yourself that question, haven't you? Who am I? That isn't the most important question.

What is the meaning of life? That's a big question too, don't you think? It's been thrown around for centuries by philosophers without a lot of successful answers because it leads to so many other questions like who, what, when, why, how and how long. It is ultimately related to the first, an ontological question about existence. If I exist, why do I exist? What is the meaning of life? That's not the important question I'm about to ask you.

You might think since you are sitting in church, that the important question will be theological and you'd be right. You might even assume that I will be evangelical and ask if you believe in Jesus as your Lord and Savior. That is an important question and it is one that I hope you have answered. But it is not the most important question, at least according to Jesus because, in the end, Jesus says that the most important question is, "Do you care?"

I don't know if that surprises you. "Do you care?" It doesn't sound like it should be the most important question. Parents ask the question of their teenagers when they fall behind in their studies or give in to adolescent sloth. Do you care? Irritated employers question poorly performing workers with the same. Do you care? Politics and the upcoming mid-terms are about, "Do you care?" It doesn't seem like it should be the most important question given the many applications and places we use it. But Jesus makes it the most important question. I don't think I am putting words into Jesus' mouth when I offer this statement about the genetic makeup of follower of

Jesus. You are not a Christian if you are not a caring person. You might think I'm being harsh but this what Jesus teaches in his last parable.

It comes at the end of Matthew. It has various names. Sometimes, it is just called the parable of sheep and goats. Others times it is called the parable of the final judgment. It probably isn't one of your favorites. But it is there, none the less and we can't get around the fact. Jesus says, "When the Son of Man comes in his glory... he will separate people one from another..." (Matthew 25: 31-32) How will he separate people? It will be based up those who cared and those who didn't. Those who didn't care about the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the lonely, the sick, and those in prison, have totally missed life. He puts it bluntly. "Depart from me." And they were surprised when he said it and they asked, "When did we see you hungry, thirsty, naked, lonely, sick, and in prison?"

Those who cared for the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick, and those in prison, he tells them to "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. (Matthew 25:34) They too were surprised and said, "When did we see you?" The point Jesus makes is clear. Caring people move into the presence of God. Uncaring people move away from the presence of God.

I don't know if you have thought about caring and uncaring in this way before but it shines a bright light on what is most important. We can do everything right in life, keep all the laws, be successful in all sorts of ventures, give away all our possessions and give prophetic voice to God's truth, even understand all its mysteries, but if we don't love and care for others, we gain nothing. We enter God's presence by the way we answer, "Do you care?" Why? Because anything we do for one in need, any caring act we offer, we do for Jesus.

While this parable at the end of Jesus' teaching ministry shocked the disciples and continues to shock us, it shouldn't. It wasn't a new subject. Jesus covers it over and over again. Remember, he says, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." (Matthew 10:40). Isn't that, "When was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you?"

Jesus puts a child before them and says to his disciples: "...whoever in the name of a disciple gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water to drink... shall not lose his reward." (Matthew 10:42) Sounds like: "When was it that we saw you thirsty and gave you something to drink?"

Jesus tells a story about a man that gets beat up on the road to Jericho and says a priest and a Levite don't care enough to help the poor man lying broken in a ditch. A Samaritan stops and then Jesus asks, "Who was the neighbor? Who cared?" Isn't this, "When did we see you sick and visit you?"

He tells a parable about a poor man named Lazarus and a rich gourmet who ate sumptuously and wore lavish garments of purple. He didn't care enough to give Lazarus the crumbs from his table. In the end, it was Lazarus who moved in the presence of God and the rich man who moved away from the presence of God. That's story about "When was it that we saw you hungry and gave you something to eat?"

Why the surprise? Jesus has taught this all along. They shouldn't have been shocked by the last parable but I think they were. Like us, maybe they were looking for a loophole or maybe asking the typical question that comes to mind too often. "How much do I have to care to care?" I assume the disciples were shocked and didn't understand until after Jesus death and resurrection because they act that way. Instead of caring for those in need, they go fishing. Jesus shows up early in the morning and starts cooking a reminder breakfast on the beach. He wants to revisit the caring question with Peter. Over BBQ fish, he asks Peter, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love me?" That's the theological question you thought I was going to ask. Peter says yes not once but three times and every time, Jesus comes back with the same challenge. He says, "Feed my sheep." He might as well have said "Care." Jesus makes it clear that if you love him, if you love Jesus, then you care. The genetic makeup of a disciple is expressed in works of love and compassion, in caring for your neighbor.

With Jesus, the center of a life of faith is about caring. This genetic characteristic is developed in the three previous discipleship genes we've looked at. In gathering, we honor and praise God because the ultimate spirit of God is compassion and love. God sent Jesus because God loved and cared about us.

In the second characteristic, connecting, we connect with one another around the Word of God, and are spiritually transformed into compassionate, caring followers again, because of God's love and care for us. The third is serving. Serving together we build the Body of Christ into a community of caregivers to respond to the needs those among us. The three build upon one another until we get to the caring gene, the one which Jesus reminds us of his most important question. "Do you care?"

After that beach breakfast, the disciples clearly got it because it is how they lead the early church. We see this picture in the first weeks after Pentecost. They focused on the needs of others more than themselves. As a group, they believed that God noticed, cared, and acted by giving them Jesus, that through His love, they were saved. They were transformed by this truth and they become "of one heart and soul." They too noticed, cared and acted in love, voluntarily and sacrificially caring for others even to the point of seeing their own personal possessions as available to everyone in the community. The result was "...there was not a needy person among them" (Acts 4:35)

It is a remarkable statement. First century Palestine was deeply impoverished, oppressed by exorbitant taxes due to Herod the Great's many building projects. Poor harvests and famine were common and as a pilgrimage city, Jerusalem was a magnet for beggars. It was a desperate time and a large percentage of the population was extremely poor, surviving largely on charity.

There were essentially two groups of people in the first century. The first group was the relatively small wealthy class who possessed land and property holdings. The second group often referred to as "the people of the land" was well over 95% of the population. This group was made up of the poor, peasant farmers working on leased lands, artisans, such as carpenters, slaves, hired laborers, widows, and orphans. Judaism of Jesus' day accepted the social disparity and did not find it necessary to change the situation; rather, they responded legalistically, giving the minimum to charity required by the Mosaic Law. But they also found ways to avoid charitable acts by declaring many of the most severely needy unclean.<sup>1</sup>

You can see why the phrase "There was not a needy person among them." (Acts 4:34a) is striking. While history does not record a sudden region-wide social transformation, it is clear that the first fully committed followers of Jesus saw the social needs in their community and responded. They were caring, finding resources, sometimes selling property and then, "... laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need." (Acts 4:35) It is a description of the first outreach program used to serve the community in Jerusalem. They responded not because the law required them to respond. They responded because Jesus said, "...just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."(Matthew 25: 40b)

They understood what Jesus taught them. Being a Christian is really about caring. True discipleship is experienced when we care for others because, in Jesus, God cared for us. And they understood that there is an advantage in

caring together as a church. It helps you see those who you need to care for and gives a vehicle through which to respond.

Given Jesus most important question, it is important to both you and to our church to have a strong, caring outreach ministry. We do. As a congregation, we have many opportunities for those in need. And like the early church, a major focus is hunger. Despite the appearance of affluence, "food insecurity" and hunger exists. Food insecurity is defined at times throughout the year when there is inadequate food in the home to meet nutritional standards. It surrounds us with the percentage of food insecurity in Marion County being 18.3%, which represents 173,000 people.<sup>2</sup> In Hancock County, food insecurity is at 10.2% but only 8.8% in Hamilton County. That said, that number in Hamilton County represents 10,260 children.<sup>3</sup>

You may not see them but there are lots of hungry people in our community. We support two different food pantries and you can support them by bringing groceries with you to worship. Shopping lists and collections bins are found at the entries of the building. A new gleaning program called St. Andrew's is providing a way to support food pantries with leftover food. Our signature program Season for Giving is also about food insecurities.

Hunger isn't the only need we care about. There are the sick, the naked, and the imprisoned. When we care for these, we care for Jesus. We offer meals at the Dayspring Homeless Shelter, support Wheeler mission with a meal and Find and Feed, care for the families of the sick at Ronald McDonald House. We have an active prison ministry to the Pendleton Correctional facility. These teams are always looking for caring people to join them.

In addition to these location ministries, there are six mission trips over the next eight months because the people who need to receive to care aren't in our midst. Those who are recovering from floods and hurricanes need our care. We respond through these trips and our Week of Compassion ministry. It is the way we care.

As you came into worship, you should have received a card about ways of caring. I hope, if you aren't already actively involved in one of this ministries, you find a place. Embrace the discipleship of caring. It will help you answer what Jesus says is the most important question, "Do you care."

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<sup>1</sup> Charlotte Allen, *The Human Christ: The search for the Historical Jesus* (Oxford,1998), 15-91.

<http://www.savi.org/savi/documents/FinishedArticle.pdf>

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<sup>3</sup> <https://feedingindianashungry.org/blog/hunger-data/>