

# SEVEN STAGES OF CHARITY

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Matthew 25: 31-34 - The judgement of the nations

1 Corinthians 13:1-13 - Faith, hope, and charity ("love")

I thought of asking John [Girvan] to read the second of today's passages from the Authorized King James version, but I decided that would be a little bit much to try to stumble over. The familiar words are good in that great Corinthians hymn to love which speaks of love so many times, but we would have noticed in the King James version that the original word for "love" was "charity." The reason for the change to "love" is that the meaning of "charity" has changed over the years. Its original meaning is indeed very much about love--love writ large, love in its fullest depth--but the word has come to mean something different. The New Testament has more than one word for love, but the strongest and most powerful is *agape*, and that's the Greek word that was translated as "charity" in the King James version and is now translated as "love." It is interesting that, somehow, our word for "love" keeps getting ruined; today, "love" is so misused that it is no longer adequate to explain the real in-depth meaning of *agape*.

What we are talking about now is *agape*, that self-giving fullness, that depth of love that was so close to the heart of Jesus' message and that became the English word "charity" before it took off in a different direction. I chose the passage from Matthew because it picks up on that sense of what the Hindu faith would call "karma"--that the way we live our lives has a much more pervasive effect on ourselves and the world than we often notice. The language of the New Testament contains the dramatic images of Heaven and Hell, but that means it can be translated into all kinds of different thought forms and language. What it means is that we ruin our own lives if we fail to respond with the love, the *agape*, that is at the heart of the gospel.

So these are two ideas that I think are important for us to consider today. As I thought about the meaning of charity my mind was drawn to the great outpouring of "charity" that is emerging in response to the Tsunami tragedy that occurred on Boxing Day in south Asia. And as we consider the meaning of charity, it struck me that we develop our sense of charity through several stages. This morning I want to use those stages as a way of talking about charity as an expression of our faith. I want to talk about it in a way that is not judgemental; rather, in a way that recognizes that for most of us, for our world, for our society, there is a much deeper way we can live charity than we are presently living.

In a sense, therefore, I am really talking about seven stages as a way of considering how any one of us, or any group or organization, at whatever stage we presently find ourselves, can deepen our faithfulness by considering what it would take to move to the next stage.

(1) As I see it, the first stage of charity is just to notice, just to observe. Some people won't get even to that stage; the news comes on and they pick up the clicker and change

to “reality” TV! We don’t have to notice; we don’t have to care; we can ignore even 120,000 people being killed in a disaster such as this. We’re good at that. We can ignore the millions that die of starvation every year. So merely to notice is an act of charity at a kind of primal level. It’s a kind of first step. That stage, therefore, is merely to leave the news on, to let ourselves be shocked, to be impacted. We then know that our world is a dangerous world in which what happens elsewhere can happen to us. The shock is not about them, it’s not about the people that are hurt. It’s about us, and that is because it triggers our own stuff, our own fears, our own guilt, our own sense of weakness. It triggers something in us, and the realization of what has occurred puts us immediately into some kind of shock. That in itself is an act of charity; it’s the beginnings of that true love, true *agape*.

(2) We then move to a second stage of charity which is our feeling response. We may even cry. We feel some kind of an outpouring of sympathy, of compassion for the amazing number of people who so suddenly had their lives devastated. We may even feel overwhelmed by the pain of that devastation as if there were this great and sudden welling up of sorrow and pain in the world, and we can all feel it. That’s the true meaning of compassion, to let ourselves feel the hurting and the suffering of another. That’s the second stage of charity. And again we are free. We have a choice, we don’t have to let that in, we don’t have to let ourselves feel it. We can shut it out. It takes a certain kind of faithfulness, faith, soul, heart, to let ourselves be moved by the suffering of another, let alone the sudden massive suffering of so many. So that, too, is charity.

(3) The third stage comes when we move to the giving, the donation. And that’s where most of the energy has been this past week. That, too, is charity. It is our own personal giving. When we see an address on the TV we write a cheque, we send money via the internet, or we contribute through our church, and our government sends money or troops or other assistance. So we have this outpouring of donations to assist people in their time of need. On that point I distributed a sheet of paper this morning. I looked up the United Church’s official channel of response called Action by Churches Together, ACT International, which is affiliated with the World Council of Churches. Of course there are many channels, and many kinds of response are required. We might donate to the Red Cross or some other organization.

One reason I think the United Church focuses on Action by Churches Together is that this organization is ongoing and global in its scale. On Thursday, when I read the article on the sheet I distributed, there was news about how slow Canada’s response was in comparison to other responses, and there were pictures of things being loaded onto airplanes and ready to fly to Southern Asia. I then read the description of the response by Action by Churches Together which arrived in the devastated areas within hours of the disaster. That is one reason I think it is an important response--it’s a World Council of Churches organization that has people all over the world, has the necessary supplies in forward positions all the time, and has distribution mechanisms in various parts of the country. So I thought, yes, that’s a crucial part. Part of the total response is, of course, the millions or billions of dollars that come a week later and a year later and so on; but one part that is so important is the response which arrives within hours. Because Action by Churches Together is ongoing, it will still be responding to the Southern Asia situation a year from now, and probably five years from now when the rest of the world has forgotten.

It is interesting that last Thursday the CBC, in broadcasting news about this disaster, included a clip about Haiti where lives were demolished by hurricanes just a few months ago. The CBC portrayed people who still don't have their lives together. They interviewed one poor fellow, still trying to dig out, who said the people we're hardly recovering at all. "We're trying to dig out and rebuild, and I don't even have a shovel." That represented a striking juxtaposition: millions of aid dollars are being sent to Southern Asia while that issue is in the news, but we have just about forgotten Haiti a few months after its devastation!

(4) So that leads to the fourth stage of charity where we go beyond just being twinged in our guilt and our compassion by what is on the news. We keep on giving. We don't just write a cheque for this week; we make a pledge to the Red Cross or whomever so that we keep on giving throughout the whole ten- or fifteen-year recovery time. And that pledge is for all the other parts of the world that are still recovering from their disasters. So it becomes an ongoing and permanent commitment, not based merely on what is in the news or what is at the whim of the media. That's our fourth stage of charity.

(5) The fifth stage of charity takes us a step beyond even that, beyond the giving and the donating. It recognizes that these people in the underdeveloped parts of the world are in some ways much more vulnerable than we are. On Thursday on the CBC National News, Rex Murphy made a comment that I thought was quite striking. He said: "It's an axiom of this world that the worst things happen in the poorest places to people in the weakest circumstances, and that in the West we're always on top of fortune's wheel." He went on to talk of the responsibility of people in this part of the world, who are "on top of fortune's wheel," to go beyond the charity of giving merely because we're fortunate, wealthy and comfortable, and because someone else is vulnerable and weak. The responsibility, he said, is to go beyond, to the ongoing work of global justice, to the changes in our politics and our economics that would allow a greater equity among people around the world.

It's not just that others are living in their circumstances and we're living in ours. It's that we are all interconnected such that people of the underdeveloped world produce our food and provide all kinds of things that make our lifestyle work. Sometimes that interconnection is easy to overlook because there is so much distance between us. But in this particular situation--the Tsunami disaster--we have a dramatic illustration of the way an underdeveloped country's economy supports our opulent life style. In those hundreds of tourists who were in countries like Indonesia, we have this very unique picture of many comfortable, wealthy, well-off, western people who became just as caught up, just as flooded, just as tragedy-stricken, and just as subject to death, as the local people. It begins to awaken us to the wisdom of Donne's "never send to know for whom the *bell* tolls; It tolls for *thee*." — that sense in which none of us is free unless all of us are free.

So that's our fifth stage of charity, where we begin to engage the politics and the economics of changes in the world that would allow underdeveloped countries to share in some of the comfort and safety that we have, even to the point of providing warning systems that could have given those people even two hours of warning to get off the beaches. That doesn't take much.

(6) The sixth stage of charity is a profound spiritual movement, because that is when we start to realize our helplessness. We start to realize how stuck our politics and our economics are, we start to realize how deeply and mired in our greed we are, and how our opulence is as much a kind of captivity for us as people are captive in their poverty--that we are as unfree as they are. At that point we begin to move into some of the humility that is at the heart of our Christian faith. At that point we start to realize that we're not God. We can't just snap our fingers and complain about our Prime Minister and have some solution right there, whether the Prime Minister breaks his vacation and comes home early or not. The people in Southern Asia still died, and many more will still die. We get beyond our bickering and our selfishness. We move to some humility that realizes our helplessness, that what needs to change is not just something out there but something inside our own hearts. We start to feel our own fear.

I had a book many years ago (I lent it to somebody and never got it back) that was one of the most striking books I have ever read. It was back in the 1980's, written by Douglas Roche, and entitled *Justice, not Charity*. Douglas Roche is one of the truly profound leaders of our time. He was a Canadian senator, and Canada's ambassador for disarmament at the United Nations. He lived a vision of transformation--a vision of ending poverty and of peace-making. His vision is a critique of charity, not charity in its true sense but charity as it has become. And that is the reason we don't use the word "charity" for *agape* any more in our biblical translations. Charity in its true sense is a call to the true power of *agape*--of that kind of love that Jesus taught. It is love, charity, written large. It is how we love one another world-wide, and it's a truly self-giving kind of love.

(7) When we move into that humility and the confession and the confrontation--the terrifying confrontation--of our captivity and our powerlessness in relation to our own opulence, then and only then are we ready to move to stage seven which is for the first time true charity--the charity that is utterly self-giving. In Jesus' teachings, that is the greatest love, that one would lay down his life for another. Well, forget laying down our lives! Would we even cut back on the amount of fossil fuel we burn? Would we even reduce the amount of global resources we consume just to allow the world to become a little better balanced? That would be *agape*, that would be true charity. The Matthew reading reflects the wisdom that was so powerful in the life of Mother Teresa because she worked with the most unwanted people of the world. She said "I can do this work because when I look into the faces of these people I see Christ." That's *agape*: "Inasmuch as you have done it for the least of these my sisters and brothers, you have done it for me."

And that's the love to which we are called. Now this isn't a guilt trip. The message is that no matter what we do this week we are far, far, short of the fullness of love to which Christ calls us. But the gracious thing is that, at whichever of the seven stages we find ourselves, it's okay. If we want to live our lives with a deepened faithfulness, all we have to do is look at the next stage and ask what it would take for me to move from whatever stage I am at to the next one. And that's Christ's call. When we make that choice, then the true Christmas spirit breaks out of the bonds of tinsel and White Christmas musak and Boxing Week frenzied sales, and spills out into the whole of our lives all year round.

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