

Matthew 25 Statements



“I am thrilled that the Session has approved the motion for First Presbyterian of Athens to become a Matthew 25 church! In a time of so much pain, suffering, and devastation, our community of Athens needs our help now more than ever. For me, becoming a Matthew 25 church is FPC Athens being not just a church institution, but a church movement. It is the whirling, swirling wild child that is the Holy Spirit spilling out of our sanctuary on Sunday mornings and filling Hancock Avenue with the sunshine that is hope. It is the empathy that lifts off the pages of the Holy

Bible and floats into the air and into our lungs, giving us life and vitality. It is taking that life and vitality within ourselves and giving it to others who are without. It is telling a single mother that there will be food in the refrigerator. It is allowing a small child to receive necessary medical care. It is saving a family from losing the roof over their heads. Becoming a Matthew 25 church is taking the love in our hearts, the hope in our veins, and the progress in our mind and walking in the steps of Jesus Christ himself. While FPC Athens has been a presence in the community for a very long time, this next step as a Matthew 25 church makes our actions and presence more intentional. We are a congregation of big hearts and creative minds and I am proud and excited to see how we can spread the love of Christ throughout Athens.” – *Courtney Pittman*

“The greatest commandments are to love God and to love neighbor, as yourself. That’s what our calling boils down to. There are numerous other ways the Bible expresses particularly neighbor love, for example:



- Do unto others as you would have them do unto you (The Golden Rule)
- What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)
- Go out into the world in peace. Have courage. Hold onto what is good. Return no one evil for evil. Support the weak. Strengthen the fainthearted. Help the suffering. Honor all people (from the Epistles)
- Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, (James 1:27)

Jesus’ parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25 where the sheep feed, clothe, visit, and welcome “the least of these” strikes the same note, only in story form. By session action our church has signed on to our denomination’s initiative known as “Matthew 25” whose name is derived from the parable. The three pillars of this initiative address poverty, racism, and congregational vitality.

As we begin our third century of life as a congregation, we will be focusing on ways we can live out our calling to love God and others with Matthew 25 as our guide. Top on our agenda is discerning a significant, impactful project to fund with the \$100,000 which the session has designated above and beyond our regular outreach and mission budget. If you have ideas, please [contact me](#) or [Rob Haire](#), the Chair of the Outreach and Mission Commission.”

– Carol Strickland, Associate Pastor



“Matthew 25:31–46 calls all of us to actively engage in the world around us, so our faith comes alive and we wake up to new possibilities.”

(www.pcusa.org/matthew25)

It has been one crazy year, and thankfully we are headed into a summer that looks to be healthier, safer, and hopefully one that will be filled with lots of smiles and fun. As

we marked a year of Covid this past week, I have been thinking back through the past 365 days. It has not been easy, but thankfully my family has had everything we’ve needed to keep going and to hold onto hope. Our church is filled with families who have everything that we truly need, but as we move into year two of Covid there are still children and families in our community, state, country, and world who are suffering.

We are reminded in the Parable of the Good Shepherd that Jesus is our Good Shepherd and as his sheep he takes care of us. However, we are not just the sheep. God calls each of us to be good shepherds, good neighbors to one another. For 200 years, First Presbyterian Church of Athens has been a good shepherd in the community. By becoming a Matthew 25 Church, we have answered God’s call to learn even more ways to share God’s love and light with Athens and the world! I look forward to learning and working with all of you, especially our children, as we re-energize our faith and take action in this new year!”

– *Natalie Bishop*, Director of Children’s Ministries

“Some events make for memories and change the way we see, think, and do. One of my most powerful memories happened at First Presbyterian Church. Not in the Sanctuary, but in the Pit. Not with clergy or First Pres members but with a homeless woman. Sherlene was a single mom to two sweet, well behaved children. They were staying in our church for a Family Promise week. We were talking about how to arrange the van schedule for the following day. Sherlene worked full time. Her children were in school. She could not tell me what time she needed to leave for work the next morning—for she never got her schedule for the day until a couple of hours before she was to be there. But what about your children... how do manage if you must be at work before or after their school hours? **“I have to get help,”** she said. In that conversation I realized how little I know about the everyday problems of those who are poor. I cannot imagine how I would manage in Sherlene’s situation. One of the areas we will be focusing on as a Matthew 25 church (www.pcusa.org/matthew25) is poverty. Those who are poor face daily dilemmas such as Sherlens’s and worse.



I’m looking forward to our church being a Matthew 25 church because our actions will be **intentional**—we will consider the things we do through the lens of poverty, racism and congregational vitality. Ours is a generous church, thanks be to God, Yet we can strengthen our response to Christ’s call as described in Matthew 25:34-45 *“for I was hungry and you gave me something to eat...thirsty, a stranger, in need of clothes, sick, in prison...Lord, when did we see you hungry?”* And Christ said *“Truly I tell you, whatever you did for these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”* We can be the help for “the Sherlenes” in Athens and beyond. God has no hands and feet but ours. I am excited about the new ways we can extend the heart of Jesus by using our hands and feet in kindness and kinship to all those in need. May we see Christ in everyone we meet.”

– Kitty Donnan



“As a church we are at a very important crossroad poised to be key influencers in both shaping the conversation and being role models for how to achieve impactful and positive change in our community. As Disciples of Christ we are called upon to advocate and in our actions break down the systems, practices and

thinking that underlie social and economic injustice against people of color and those marginalized by society. If I profess out loud that I am sharing the love of Christ with my neighbor then I am sharing this love with all of my neighbors and not just those who look like me.

2 Corinthians 5:14 is my favorite verse – Christ’s love should be the first and last word in all we do. It is our firm decision to work from this focused center.

If each of us in the act of discipleship choose to make Christ our focused center and if we demonstrate this love of Christ through our words and actions, then I truly believe our wonderful congregation can be change makers in the journey towards peace and reconciliation here in Athens. Each of us can be change makers from our seniors to our youth and children and here is the best part – we do not have to do it alone. As a Matthew 25 church, we as a congregation belong to a community of believers who will guide, encourage, pray and provide so that we are successful. And most importantly, this ministry will meet you where you are in this collective journey. Each step no matter how big or how small is to be celebrated. It is coming closer to God as He comes closer to us. Thanks be to God!”

– Jennifer Abbott

“I am so proud that our Congregation has accepted the call from the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. to be recognized as a Matthew 25 church. As we go forward on this journey, one might ask: “how is being a Matthew 25 church any different than what we have always done in our many Mission and Outreach efforts”? Let me share with you what I have learned that might help answer that question.



A more formal definition of what it means to be a Matthew 25 church would state that our congregation must not only *believe* in the teachings of Christ but we also must live and *practice* the teachings of Christ. A Matthew 25 church is one that is committed to treating the symptoms of racism and poverty while also working to address the underlying causes of these problems.

One of my favorite quotes by Martin Luther King, Jr. helped me understand what it means to be a Matthew 25 church. He made famous the saying that “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.” What being a Matthew 25 church means to me is that we are not a congregation that sits on the sidelines and hopes that the “arc” is bending towards “justice”; instead, we are dedicating ourselves to being proactive in this effort: taking measures to ensure that the “moral arc” will bend steadily towards justice.

So, to me, I find that being a Matthew 25 church speaks to my belief that as a Christian we should be practicing our faith by engaging in activities and causes that work “to bend the arc of the moral universe” so that all God’s people are treated equally.

These are things that I know this church already believes. Being a Matthew 25 church just makes our intentions clear to all and guides our actions down a dedicated path. I look forward to working with you all as we walk down our Matthew 25 path together.”

– Rob Haire



“By accepting the invitation to be a Matthew 25 church we are joining with our denomination to be a more relevant presence in our neighborhood and in our world.

In reading through our new church history we have seen the changes that have occurred over 200 years. While we celebrate and rejoice in that history we also see the challenges and conflicts that those before us had to work through. We acknowledge that those periods can be difficult and even hurtful to read about but we can learn from them and move forward in a spirit of reconciliation.

Energized in our discipleship we can rejoice in worship and go forth sharing the love of Christ with Athens and the world while working to create a more just and equitable world.”

– *Beverly Phares*

“Matthew 25 has been a lifeline.

In a year when I have more often felt lost at sea, afraid for our country and my child, questioning the role of the church, uncertain of how to make my voice heard or even if my voice mattered...becoming a Matthew 25 Church has been a lifesaver, a life-giver.

It has reminded me of why I chose to become Presbyterian, for we are a connectional church committed to justice. It has provided opportunities to share my story and hear the stories of other members through deep, authentic conversations. It has provided a structure and a platform to explore hard issues through the lens of the Gospel. And most importantly, it has given me a sense of hope and purpose for myself and our church.



This Sunday is Youth Sunday, led by our high school seniors. The scripture is from the final verse in Luke about the Ascension of Jesus, an unexplainable event during which Jesus commands his disciples to go and be witnesses.

Go, he tells us. Our world desperately needs to hear messages of God's unbounded love.

Go, he tells us. To demand justice for His people, who were all created in His image.

Go, he tells us. With open minds and open hearts, being willing to learn and grow together.

Go, he tells us. Feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, visit the prisoner.

'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for to me.'

Becoming a Matthew 25 Church does not fundamentally change who we are. Instead, it allows us to stand firm on our 200 years of ministry as we step into a new century, committed to being witnesses for justice and love. I am excited to walk this path with each one of you."

Kim Ness, Director of Youth Ministries



“This Sunday, we celebrate the Kirkin’ of the Tartans, the annual worship service that remembers our Reformed roots in the Church of Scotland, blesses all the members of our Kirk from diverse lineages, and charges our leaders and elected officials to honorably serve and take care of all the people of God.

One legacy of the Reformation, the time for corporate confession, is so essential that it opens every worship service. The Reformation emphasized that, rather than focusing inordinate attention on individual failings, we should contemplate systemic Sin, our Reformed forefather John Calvin’s total depravity, the corporate state of all humanity. With the broader Christian culture pressuring the church to feed a sycophantic beat, this is a counter-cultural move. Our church is filled with folks who have worked hard, made wise choices, and striven to do good with their lives, individually and through the church. But Calvin cautions us that “nothing is more dangerous than to be blinded by prosperity.” We know that even our greatest achievements fall short, enmeshed with our sin, which our eyes see only dimly. At FPC, we have tried to honor Christ for 200 years and we have accomplished much, but we confess that sometimes we have missed the mark and done harm, through our actions or our failure to act.

But the living God calls us to continually repent and turn back to God, who graciously forgives us and sets us back in the Way of Christ, empowered to do better with the help of the Holy Spirit. We have been blessed to be a blessing, saved to serve. Calvin reminds us that “all the gifts we possess have been bestowed by God and entrusted to us on condition that they be distributed for our neighbors’ benefit.” We have power and privilege to use for the good of all God’s people, if we can humble ourselves enough to listen and see and be moved to act on behalf of the people of God crying out to us. With that understanding, the 16-17th century rallying cry, “ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda,” best translated as “Church reformed; always being/to be reformed,” asks the church to look backwards and

forward, to be honest with ourselves as we confess and get back to the basics Christ taught us that are preserved in scripture, and then, to follow the Holy Spirit guiding us forward into the world in a process of continual transformation that lifts up all the people of God.

The Matthew 25 initiative is just such a clarion call, a systemic answer to the exhortations of multiple General Assemblies for the PC-USA to act boldly and compassionately to serve people who are hungry, oppressed, imprisoned, and poor. It returns to scripture to examine what was important to Christ, shaping ministry for today and tomorrow. It casts a bold vision and an invitation to be actively engaged in the world in fresh, relevant ways: 1) to eradicate systemic poverty, 2) to dismantle structural racism, and 3) to build congregational vitality. Just as sin is corporate, so too is this reformation. We join with the entire Presbytery of Charlotte, where I was nurtured in faith, and connect to the mission work already underway in 812 congregations, 63 Presbyteries, 9 synods, and 41 other groups. The movement has just begun. I encourage you to visit the website to better understand the movement's 3 components and explore the well of resources (www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/matthew-25/). Then, please watch this brief, moving video of testimony from the Matthew 25 congregation at Knox Presbyterian Church in Louisville, KY: <https://vimeo.com/512591705>

The more I learn about the work of this broad and deep initiative, the more grateful I am that our session has joined our congregation to this holy labor that will surely re-invigorate our faith, our church, and her mission. How will you help our church propel this movement forward?

May God bless you and our church in this labor of love, with hope in Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit moving through us!"

— *Margaret Fulghum Davis*, Parish Associate

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“Being a parent is tough!

There is no clear guidance on how to help parents navigate an ever changing world while parenting it would seem. There is prayer and like many parents, I’ve prayed a lot while on this journey with our daughters.

Don and I have made it a core principle to teach our daughters about the importance of service and further to learn the root issues behind the needs we choose to serve to help others. Matthew 25 underscores our principles as a family and in that I’m thrilled our church has chosen to become a Matthew 25 church.

We are called to act boldly and compassionately to serve the people who are hungry, oppressed, imprisoned or poor. As a Matthew 25 church, we as parents are being given support and guidance to teach this core principle to our young people not just how to act boldly and compassionately but why it is so important. A lesson that our children will take with them long after they leave our home.

Whether it be the Food Bank, food drives at schools, Meals on Wheels, Athens Eats, Food2Kids, Our Daily Bread or other opportunities we have made it a natural part of our life to serve and to actively do so as a family. It has become so natural in our home to help in these areas that it never seems like a chore or a dreaded task on the to-do list. It is a privilege to help and all the while knowing we can and should do more. We have to listen. We have to speak up. We have to step up.

Matthew 25 calls upon us as individuals, influencers, mentors, parents and more to step up! You’re never too young or too old to do just that.”

– *Melinda DeMaria*

Matthew 25 is some of the most important scripture in the New Testament. In its verses we learn much about what the church is to be.

In the last chapter of the gospel of Luke, we hear the story commonly known as the walk to Emmaus. We learn of two men walking on the road who meet up with Jesus, but their eyes are kept from recognizing Him. They are walking the road on that first Easter Sunday. They ask Jesus if he's the only person who doesn't know of the events of the past few days. Jesus says, "What things?" So, they tell Jesus all the details of the crucifixion and

resurrection. When they finally get home in Emmaus, they have supper together. Then scripture says that when Jesus took bread and blessed it and broke it then their eyes were opened, and they recognized Him. These men knew all about Jesus, but they didn't know Him.

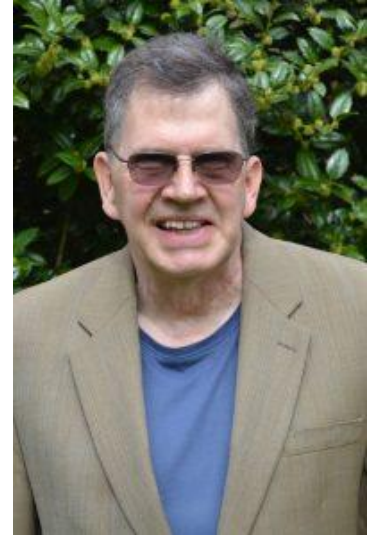
This story speaks to me. I think that like the men on the road to Emmaus, I know too much about Jesus and too little of Jesus. So how should I fix that?

Matthew 25 gives the key to knowing Jesus. "In as much as you've done it to the least of these my brothers and sisters, you've done it unto me."

Those are the words of our Lord. So, we know Jesus when we feed the hungry. We know Jesus when we give a person who is thirsty a drink. We know Jesus when we welcome a stranger. We know Jesus when we take care of a sick person. We know Jesus when we visit the prisoner. The difference between the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the sick, the prisoner and Jesus is zero. They are one and the same.

Being a Matthew 25 church means that we serve our neighbors because when we serve them, we are actually serving Christ Jesus our Lord.

— *Kent Burel*





The month of May marks the anniversary of my ordination to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament. I don't remember the sermon or the prayers that were said that day, although I'm sure they were thoughtful and eloquent. What I remember so vividly is the sensation of the weight of the hands upon my head and shoulders.

In our Presbyterian way of being the church, whenever women and men are ordained to the offices of Deacon, Elder, or the Ministry of Word and Sacrament, they are invited to come forward and kneel while those previously ordained gather around them and lay their hands upon them, symbolizing the apostolic ministry of the Church. Then, the whole congregation prays for the Spirit's wisdom to guide and sustain those being ordained in their ministry.

When we ordain women and men to the offices of the church, it's not solely an act of the local congregation; it's an act of the whole Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). When we ordain people at First Presbyterian Church, those in the sanctuary are acting on behalf of well over a million Presbyterians across the nation.

I will never forget the feeling of both the warmth and the weight of those hands upon my head and shoulders as I knelt and the congregation prayed over me. After the prayer was concluded, I stood up, and then a colleague in ministry charged me to be always on the lookout for God's "fingerprints," and to point them out to people wherever and whenever I came across them.

Within the pages of this edition of [Summer@First](#), you will learn more about the Matthew 25 initiative of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), in which the entire Church is called to come together around three missional foci: building congregational vitality, eradicating systemic poverty, and dismantling structural racism.

As I think about the critical theological, moral, and ethical tasks before the Church in the coming years, it strikes me that God is already in the world doing these things. God is in the business of building vital congregations. God is in the business of eradicating poverty. God is in the business of tearing down the dividing walls of racism. As Presbyterians, we believe that God moves in the world, and we respond. Matthew 25's foci aren't "new initiatives" so much as they are places where Presbyterians across the nation have seen the evidence of God's "fingerprints" already at work in the world, and we are joining our hands and hearts together as one Church in the work that God is already doing.

I'm prayerful that you will engage thoughtfully and prayerfully with the bible study materials provided within these pages. Bible study is best done in community in "real time," but such is life in the waning days of the pandemic. As you read, should you have questions or insights as you engage with the material, I'd welcome the chance to have a conversation with you.

Peace be with you and yours,

Ryan Baer,
Senior Pastor