

If you are to google Matthew 25 and consider what Wikipedia has to say, you would encounter, “Matthew 25, the twenty-fifth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, continues the Olivet Discourse or "Little Apocalypse" spoken by Jesus Christ, also described as the Eschatological Discourse, which had started in chapter 24. American theologian Jason Hood, writing in the *Journal of Biblical Literature*, argues that chapter 23, chapter 24, and chapter 25 of the Gospel of Matthew form the fifth and final discourse in the gospel. In his reading, these three chapters together "uniquely infuse Jesus' distinctive teaching on discipleship, Christology, and judgment with the dramatic tension running throughout Matthew's plot". Makes sense right? Sure, it does. It sounds good, but what does all that mean?

If you are to ask me what Matthew 25 is about, I would say, “Circle up.”

Ever watch football and wonder why a quarterback puts his hands together and motions toward the rest of the offense. A coach can also do this from the sideline. I have even seen basketball coaches do it too. What does it mean? It means to circle up, huddle up, come together and make sure you are all on the same page.

The heart of 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. Convicted by this passage, both the 222nd and 223rd General Assemblies (2016 and 2018) exhorted the PC(USA) to act boldly and compassionately to see our neighbors through Jesus’ eyes and serve those who are marginalized or in need — people who are hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, imprisoned, strangers, poor or oppressed in other ways and in need of welcoming. This work is a direct response to the good news of Jesus and a faithful expression of what it means to be Christ’s disciples in this time and place. It is believed and hoped for that by accepting and embodying the Matthew 25 invitation, our denomination becomes a more relevant presence in the world, we recognize Christ’s urgent call to be a church of action, where God’s love, justice and mercy shine forth and are contagious, and we rejoice how our re-energized faith can unite us for a common and holy purpose: our common identity to fulfill God’s mission.

Do me a favor and look at the cover of the bulletin this morning. On the cover is the logo of the Matthew 25 charge. As any good service or product branding does, significant meaning lies within the image you see.

- The circular shape represents unity and equality. Like God, a circle has no beginning and no end, and it symbolizes our continuing effort to help one another. The shape also suggests a globe that points to our engagement with the world.
- The three interlocking figures represent the equality of all people without gender or race bias. They have their arms around each other, symbolizing friendship, protection and service. The number three suggests the three focus areas of congregational vitality, structural racism and systemic poverty, as well as the Trinity.
- The color palette is bright, lively, friendly and energetic — suggestive of our active commitment.
- Finally, the legend “Matthew 25” below the symbol is the literal identification of the mark. A handwritten font is used to make the point that active engagement in the world requires human effort.

Circle up everybody. The play is in. All of you gather around. Lean in so you can hear this! (Imagine all of us leaning in with our heads touching in a circle and our arms all wrapped around one another’s shoulders) Here is the play! **Matthew 25!** You ready?! You ready?! We need everyone on this one for it to work. Whatever you do, stay active and engaged the whole time. Whatever you do, stay active and engaged the whole time.

First, we are going to build congregational vitality by challenging one another to deepen and energize our faith and grow as joyful leaders and disciples. I know, I know, I know. We are already pretty close. Everything with the congregation looks vibrant to me, we might say. And I would say, YES, AND we can be stronger, closer, more engaged, more committed, more trusting. This is a step we must not settle—we must all choose this and make a decision that we will do all we can for God’s glory to be witnessed. We must be dedicated to one another and able to count on one another. Listen up... without this first step, our next two are going to be tough. Your buying in is needed and we need you to sell out.

Our congregational vitality is going to help us continue two of things Jesus was very passionate about. We are going to work on dismantling structural racism by fearlessly applying our faith to advocate and break down the systems, practices and thinking that underlie discrimination, bias, prejudice and oppression of people of different race. Jesus did this with the Pharisees and Sadducees as he was not only willing to eat with tax collectors, but gentiles. I know, I know, I know. We are not racist so what else is there to do with this. We can call it out if we see it in action and by doing so we can help others see it too. In our workplaces, in our homes, in

our clubs or places of community fellowship, on the streets. Are there really any innocent bystanders?

And we are going to work to eradicate systemic poverty by acting on our beliefs to change laws, policies and structures in our society that perpetuate economic exploitation of people who are poor. Again, I know, I know, I know. We do Impact, we give money to the church, we serve on the board of a local agency that helps with this, what else is there to do. We can continue. We can see our neighbors on the street and stop and give them the time of day. We can help others be aware by inviting them to join us when we do Impact or go on a mission trip to Malawi or serve a meal at the local café. We can write letters to lawmakers and how we vote may matter.

A voice from the huddle says, “Yeah, yeah, yeah, get on with it the play clock is winding down. I don’t know if I have time for this?” That reason doesn’t fly. God has given us more than a 25 second play clock to get this play off. God has given us the time and breath and energy we have with each day to enact this play.

Another voice from the huddle says, “Okay then, I don’t know how we can possibly take these monumental tasks on? Are we by ourselves? Who else is doing this? Seems improbable!” I get it, I really do, but we can’t think like that. I know it feels like a hail mary with no time left on the clock, the damage is already done, so what point is there in trying. I get it. But, we are not by ourselves. Churches and communities and individuals all around the world are committed. And, God is with us. It might feel like a longshot, but we give it a go and say “Here, I AM” to God’s call because in God, hope still exists and as long as we have that, what we have to do is believe and trust that God will carry us through, even when damage has already been done or continues to happen.

The testimonies of residents in Altadena, CA and other places around them destroyed by the fires thought there was no way, “Won’t happen to me.” How could it? Anyone who has ever had tragedy strike their homes or lives must feel this way at some point. In these tragedies, the powers at play feel insurmountable- the power of the water, fire, wind- cars being moved, roofs being torn off, entire homes being ripped from their foundation.

I was watching a news cast yesterday morning in which the journalist was reporting about the size of the embers flying through the air and catching more things around it ablaze. Basketball and boulder sized embers were being thrown through the air by the power of the wind, from one side of the street to the other- hundreds of feet. The journalist reported her amazement of the power of the wind, she never imagined anything like it, and yet, here she was watching it with her own eyes. And not only that, as an ember landed a few feet from her and her crew, near a house that had

yet to be touched, she went to put out that ember in hopes of saving the home. Yesterday she reported that the home remained.

True, she didn't stomp on the whole fire and put it out, but she did stomp an ember that could have created more damage. And what difference does that make? Monumental to that home. Monumental to the people who live in that home. Monumental in keeping other more embers from that home to become destructive to others on that side of the street or deeper into the neighborhood.

Is it possible to do this heavy work God is calling us to? You bet it is. One stomp at a time. One open door at a time. One shout out at a time. One full stomach at a time. One act of kindness at a time. One gift of dignity at a time. With each one, the possibility grows. The power of the Spirit is the greatest power and the power of the Spirit is on our side. In the power of the Spirit we too can spread the good news of the gospel to all our neighbors, all God's people in a monumental way. We can stand in amazement and think no way, almost like what is happening is a fantasy (or a nightmare)- that we will wake up from it and it won't be real. Wake up! It is real, and in the power of the Spirit, with the guidance of Jesus' teaching and charge, this play can be a success and the blessed hope of Jesus can be experienced by all.

Another voice from the huddle says, "Why can't someone else do this? Why us?" Because we are the church, the body of Christ, and this is the work God has blessed us and empowered us and called us to do. Because we are the church, and this is what the church of Jesus does. Come on you all, we can do this!

Remember, whatever you do, stay active and engaged. Ready?! Ready?! Break!