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First Congregational Church  
United Church of Christ  
East Hartford, Connecticut

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### Sins of Omission

(Fifth in series, “What Did Jesus Say?”)  
(Suggested Topics for Lent from the Congregation)

Matthew 25:31-46

I don't know about you but when I consider all the trouble and pain in the world, it seems like it is endless, and that there is always more that I might do to make it better. Even so, at the end of all time when the sheep who have faithfully served God by caring for people in need are gathered together on one side, and the goats who have not faithfully served God by caring for people in need are gathered on the other, I like to think that I will be among the sheep. But you know, when it comes down to it, I don't know that I can say that I am a pure bred sheep, surely there is at least a little bit of goat in me too. After all, I could always do more. No matter how much I have given—time, talent, treasure—I could have given more. Perhaps this is what the person had in mind who submitted the topic for consideration this morning, sins of omission. Perhaps it is not so much what we do wrong that weighs upon our consciences as what we do not do that is right?

There is a moving scene in the movie of a few decades ago entitled “Schindler's List.” Oskar Schindler was a wealthy business man in Nazi Germany and he helped over a thousand Jews escape from Nazi capture and extermination in the concentration camps by paying bribes for their lives. Toward the end of the film, upon the immanent defeat of Germany and while speaking with a Jewish acquaintance named Stern, Schindler shares his remorse that he did not do enough. Schindler suffered this terrible regret even though his efforts saved so many. The conversation went like this:

I could have got more out. I could have got more. I don't know. If I'd just...I could have gotten more.

*Oskar, there are eleven hundred people who are alive because of you. Look at them.*

If I'd made more money...I threw away so much money. You have no idea. If I'd just...

*There will be generations because of what you did.*

*I didn't do enough!*

*You did so much.*

This car. Goeth would have bought this car. Why did I keep the car? Ten people right there. Ten people. Ten more people.

This pin. Two people. This is gold. Two more people. He would have given me two for it, at least one. One more person. A person, Stern. For this. I could have gotten one more person...and I didn't. And I...I didn't.

Well, I suppose Schindler was right. What do you think? Could he have done more? Yes, of course, probably so. But isn't that always the case for everyone, if we really think about it, we can always do more good in some way. For we Christians, if we have spiritual courage and integrity to face it, isn't it the case that we can always do more for Christ? Isn't it the case that we can always do more for the church? Isn't it the case that we can always give more, help more, love more? Who among us is not guilty of endless sins of omission? And yet, is that all there is to it? If Schindler was right, was not Stern also right? Schindler did not do everything that he absolutely could have possibly done, but he did a lot. Should Schindler take some comfort in what he did or only berate himself for what he did not do?

Those who are the sheep in the parable that Jesus told in the scripture reading this morning, the ones who fed the hungry and so fed Christ, who gave water to the thirsty and so to Christ, who welcomed the stranger and so welcomed Christ, who clothed the naked and so clothed Christ, who visited the imprisoned and so visited Christ, did they feed and water and welcome and clothe and visit absolutely everyone who needed it? Did they do what they did with all their money, all their food, all their water, all their time? Did they give their last dollar, their last crust of bread, their last bit of energy? I don't think that is what the allegory implies nor is it that which Jesus requires. If it is there have never been any sheep and there never will be.

We might draw at least these three practical conclusions from a consideration of sins of omission. First, we are only human. Second, others are only human too. And third, the church's work is never done.

To acknowledge our own humanity might at least be to accept the fact that we can't do everything. But it seems to me that we accept some limitations easier than others. For instance, most of us are pretty good at accepting our physical limitations, although I admit that even here I sometimes have trouble in my advancing years allowing that I can not do physically what I used to be able to do. But in general don't we usually make our peace with our physical limitations? For instance, I could never standing jump six feet straight up. I am not a kangaroo or a buffalo. I read once that a buffalo can standing jump over a fence six feet high. I also can not be two places at one time. I can not fly on my own. You get the idea. And I have mental limitations too. I can not process information as fast as my computer. I can not memorize the books contained in the Library of Congress. Now, we might think at this point that of course no one can do any of these things, we ought not be ridiculous. Okay. If my limitations are so obvious then why am I so often hard on myself when it comes to things that I did not do? Am I human or am I not? Does God expect me to do everything or does God not? If God does not expect me to do every good thing in this world that needs to be done then why should I?

Psychologists tell us that there are two basic irrational personality types. They are often identified as the neurotic type and the personality disordered type. The neurotic tends to think of him or herself as a chronic underachiever. A neurotic person tends to overemphasize his or her responsibility for things. Neurotic people suffer a lot of guilt even when it is not justified. On the other hand, people with personality disorders don't see their faults even when they should. They tend to underemphasize their responsibility for things. At their worst, people with personality disorders become criminals. Prisons contain many of them. If you ask them, they will tell you that what they did was not their fault. They are always innocent. Their being in prison is really the fault of someone else, or the police, or society at large. Statistically, between the two, neurotics are much more prevalent than people with personality disorders. Some say that everyone is to some degree one type or the other and the vast majority of us lean toward the neurotic. I think that I am certainly in the majority here. I feel more guilt than I deserve, at least I hope so. The last part of that statement itself may indicate how neurotic I am. And when it comes to sins of omission we neurotics might be especially vulnerable. We can always imagine that we could have done more. In my ministry I have spent much more time encouraging people to be easier on themselves than trying to get them to see their sins. Most of us, it seems to me, see our sins quite well, sometimes maybe too well, especially our sins of omission.

The second point is like the first. Other people are human too? Can others do everything? Yet we say, "Well, he could have done this, or she could have done that." Maybe, but that is no different than for anyone else. The one thing I know for sure is that no one but God can do everything. If ever there is a need for gracious understanding in life, of ourselves as well as of others, it is in relation to sins of omission.

The third point also is like the first and second. There is always more work for the church to do than the church can do. There is the idea which some people hold that having endowments in the church is not really good stewardship. The theory is that money that is given should all be spent immediately because the need for the spiritual and physical and social care of others is needed now. The thinking continues that having endowments can make a congregation lax when it comes to its own stewardship, that it might just rely on the contribution of previous generations to meet the church's budget today. But I disagree for two reasons. First, most congregations today have a building already provided although its maintenance, as we know well at First Church, continues to be a responsibility of every generation. Being provided a Meeting House gives a congregation an opportunity to use its resources for other things. And here may be the most important point. There is always more mission and ministry for the church to do. It seems to me that if having an endowment results in stewardship lethargy the problem is not the endowment, the problem is a lack of vision. I don't think any church should ever think that it has enough money until all the work that needs to be done for Christ on earth has been done, and we know that is still so far from being accomplished. And here is where an appropriate balance is needed. The point is not for the church to feel guilty about what it does not do, to belittle itself because it sees its limitations. The better idea would be to celebrate its mission and ministry while at the same time realizing that there

is so much more that it could do with additional resources. A little dissatisfaction may be spiritually healthy, self-condemnation is not. There is always more work for the church to do than it can do. Thank you, Lord, for all that we have done.

A long time ago someone once said to me that a book could be written about all of us on what we don't do that we should do. Well, quite true. If ever there is a need for a religion of grace it is in relation to sins of omission. Thanks be to God for our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who set his face for Jerusalem and did everything needed for the world's salvation. Heaven will be filled with sheep who did not.