

"Self-Selection"

Reign of Christ Sunday

November 26, 2017

Matthew 25:31-46

³¹⁻³³ *"When he finally arrives, blazing in beauty and all his angels with him, the Son of Man will take his place on his glorious throne. Then all the nations will be arranged before him and he will sort the people out, much as a shepherd sorts out sheep and goats, putting sheep to his right and goats to his left.*

³⁴⁻³⁶ *"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Enter, you who are blessed by my Father! Take what's coming to you in this kingdom. It's been ready for you since the world's foundation. And here's why:*

*I was hungry and you fed me,
I was thirsty and you gave me a drink,
I was homeless and you gave me a room,
I was shivering and you gave me clothes,
I was sick and you stopped to visit,
I was in prison and you came to me.'*

³⁷⁻⁴⁰ *"Then those 'sheep' are going to say, 'Master, what are you talking about? When did we ever see you hungry and feed you, thirsty and give you a drink? And when did we ever see you sick or in prison and come to you?' Then the King will say, 'I'm telling the solemn truth: Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me—you did it to me.'*

41-43 "Then he will turn to the 'goats,' the ones on his left, and say, 'Get out, worthless goats! You're good for nothing but the fires of hell. And why? Because—

*I was hungry and you gave me no meal,
I was thirsty and you gave me no drink,
I was homeless and you gave me no bed,
I was shivering and you gave me no clothes,
Sick and in prison, and you never visited.'*

44 "Then those 'goats' are going to say, 'Master, what are you talking about? When did we ever see you hungry or thirsty or homeless or shivering or sick or in prison and didn't help?'

45 "He will answer them, 'I'm telling the solemn truth: Whenever you failed to do one of these things to someone who was being overlooked or ignored, that was me—you failed to do it to me.'

46 "Then those 'goats' will be herded to their eternal doom, but the 'sheep' to their eternal reward."

Today we leave our fellow gospel sojourner, Matthew. Next week as we enter Advent, we will search for fresh gospel wisdom from the first of the New Testament writers, Mark. As we have spent a full church calendar year trying to get a grip on Matthew's message, though, we should review what we have learned from him:

First, and foremost Matthew teaches us that Jesus was Jewish. He *always* was Jewish. Matthew sees no contradiction in being Christian and being Jewish. He has a vested interest in trying to get his new Christians to adhere to the Jewish Law, arguing that the latter

is the natural extension of the former, that to follow Christ is to declare that he is the fulfillment of the ancient Jewish prophecy foretelling the coming of a Messiah to save the people.

Second, Matthew sets forth a new way of being Jewish and Christian by attacking the narrow thinking and practices of the Jewish leaders of his day. Disgusted by what he sees happening in his 1st Century religious community, he uses his Gospel to set the compassion-and-justice heart of Jesus against the law-and-ritual heads of the Pharisees and scribes.

Against their rigid construction of the Jewish religious laws, Matthew provides us with a continuous flow of powerful and poetically emotional evidence tending to show Jesus as the new Moses of the Jewish faith. The birth narrative of Baby Jesus in Bethlehem heralds the Christ child as the fulfillment of the Jewish messianic prophecies. The Sermon on the Mount is culminating occasion on which Jesus provides the compassion-and-justice interpretation of the Mosaic law.

These three chapters which make up the most famous sermon of Jesus demonstrate the genius of the Messiah as a teacher of religious principles, and include precious gems such as the Beatitudes (the "Blessed are..." statements), the Golden Rule ("Do unto others as you would have them do unto you") and the words of The Lord's Prayer.

Matthew writes about 50 years after the crucifixion of Jesus in the Greek language to a Greek-speaking community, probably living outside Palestine. "Matthew" is his pen name—we do not know to this day his true identity. We know that he is from an educated Jewish background. He has and he uses the Gospel of Mark as a resource for his stories of Jesus as well as a collection of traditions that we call the "Q source and the M source." That's about all we know of this author.

We will circle back to Matthew in about three years! In the Protestant tradition, we use a scriptural guide known as the Common Lectionary. It gives me pre-selected scripture passages for each week tracing through the Gospel book for that particular church year. Some churches follow the Common Lectionary without wavering; this is the UCC, and I am decidedly a UCC pastor, so I freely wander at times depending upon what we are doing here at church. Generally, though, I make myself use the Lectionary, especially when I don't find a lot of comfort or affirmation in the particular scripture selection for the week. It becomes a spiritual discipline for me to wrestle with the hard ones.

Like this passage today that Gus just read you...

It reads as a personal indictment, doesn't it? I mean, I pass by the homeless persons standing in the center median just about every day, holding their signs up asking for money with their words and their

eyes. Some of the signs just slay me right on the spot. There are signs held by persons with ratty clothes and unkempt hair saying that they are stranded far from home. There are signs claiming they have children in a shelter and are looking for money to rent a place for the family. There are military veterans standing out on those medians staring at nothing in particular with the vacant eyes of the tormented.

There are the folks standing with their dogs, and those kill me, too. And then there are the signs that say, "I'm not gonna lie; I really need a beer!" And I feel so indicted. I don't hand out money, but I have, on occasion, tried handing out granola bars and bottles of water. Sometimes they are accepted and I feel good, but often they are rejected, sometimes rather rudely, and I am lilly-whitebread, upper middle class, privileged, holy roller offended when that happens; I can't help it.

We have many missions here at church. We support La Puente and Parker Task Force. We support Gateway Women's Shelter and we buy bicycles for Buckley Air Force enlisted personnel. We support 6 UCC national charities, and we pitch Horseshoes for Cousin to support charities as far away as Africa and as close as right around the corner. We help a teenager in Guatemala get an education to position her to make a better life for her and her family.

It seems like so much, and yet it seems so little. We have other missions asking for our support, too. Schools, medical relief and research organizations, Scouts, and countless others count on us. And then there's our own family members and friends who sometimes find themselves stranded, addicted, ill, out of work, homeless—you name it, we all have the stories. Sometimes, we have been the one in the uncomfortable and frightening position of needing assistance; sometimes, maybe, we have been the ones on the emotional roller coaster asking - begging- for help.

It's all so overwhelming. I can't support all that I am asked to, and I suspect, neither can you. So, we pick and choose, and when we donate old clothes or furniture, when we give money away, and when we donate some of our time, we feel good for a bit, and then we feel so inadequate again. We find ourselves lamenting, "There is so much need, and there is only one of me." Are we the sheep or are we the goats?

What are we to do when Matthew's Jesus seemingly scolds us that we are not doing enough? I tell you what I am tempted to do; when the Lectionary throws Matthew 25:31-46 in my path, I am tempted to preach on something else! When I am looking at a passage, and saying to myself, "Oooh, boy, what am I gonna say about this one?" that's when I want to cut and run, that's when I want to stay home that

Sunday morning. That's when I see myself pulling the covers up over my head and pretending not to notice that this passage is weighing heavy on my heart and that 80 people here and an equal number on my email church are waiting for me to step up behind the pulpit and say something comforting, something affirming.

We all know people who have left church altogether, in part because they don't want to hear tough passages like this one read to them and preached to them. We don't come here to feel bad and we don't want to be asked to do more, to give more of our time and resources.

Okay, it's my job to be pastoral with you, so let me try this: One of the other passages for today is from the prophet Ezekiel, writing in about 580 BCE, just after Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians. He, too, wrote about sheep, and I love the images he uses of God as the shepherd and protector of the scattered and frightened flock. In Ezekiel 34, God takes a very active role in saying, "I myself will search for my sheep. I will give them their own land."

God encourages the people to depend and to rely on their shepherd, for God assures them of their rescue. A promise of land and security was music to the ears of a people who had their land taken from them, their major cities destroyed, and their temple razed down

to the ground. The worst was yet to come, and to hear the gentle words of God in the form of their heavenly shepherd helped them in the middle of their terror and grief. It helped them to surrender their oneness, to pledge obedience and faithfulness instead to their Lord.

Hundreds of years later, Matthew recalls for the oppressed people of God the image of the sheep and the shepherd, urging them to be like Ezekiel's sheep and to give themselves over again to their Lord, to the Jesus Way. Again, the sheep are scattered. Again, they are terrorized and grief-stricken, an oppressed and subjugated remnant of believers.

The metaphor of the sheep and the shepherd is not random; it is quite intentional of Matthew to recall Ezekiel's words and images. Sheep are sturdy; they are allowed into the pasture at night to graze. The goats are separated from the sheep at night by the shepherds and led into inside pens so that they can keep warm. They are less valuable than the sheep both on the market and as a nutritional source.

Jesus drops the goats out of the kingdom of God for reasons that are never really explained. But harkening back to Ezekiel's sheep metaphor, the faithful and enduring people of God are again summoned by Jesus to be what he has taught them to be. For Ezekiel, God is the

shepherd who rescues the scattered sheep; for Matthew, the True Shepherd, Christ, is teaching the people, including you and me, how to be the new shepherds in the world.

The ones who are willing to be sheep—the faithful, the obedient, the humble, the God-dependent, and the reliant Jewish followers of Jesus are ones who will be transformed, the ones who will be welcomed into the Kingdom of Heaven. The others—the goats—the unbelievers, the ones who put law ahead of justice, the ones that ignore the cries of the needy and the needs of the marginalized, well, they are just plain out of step with God's plan. There's no way to sugar-coat this passage.

Whether you believe in a physical heaven or not, the implication is that to give of yourself to another in need is to invite Christ into your heart, and in so doing, you will be a changed person, a fulfilled disciple. To keep your resources to yourself means that you have decided to live a small life, a life devoid of the Christ-light, a life that is like being sheltered like goats in the pen overnight.

What it means to be "out" of the kingdom of God like the goats Matthew says we don't want to know. But as the message and promise of new life in Christ is offered in Matthew's gospel to "all the nations," to all people, then I think some of those who could be classified as "the least of them" are the ones who are afraid to come inside these church

doors. They are folks who are afraid that they will not be accepted into the flock—they are LGBT, they are divorced, they are other-than-white, they are too old, they are too young, they are single parents, they don't have enough money, they struggle with mental illness and/or addictions, they are too uneducated in Bible-stuff, they are not comfortable around other people, they don't know what it means to be a "Christian," they have been abused in other churches or other traditions, they have lost a sense of God who cares about them.

These are the homeless, the hungry, the thirsty, the damaged, the prisoners, and the lame. They are all of God's sheep needing to be found.

This passage might speak to you because you have a relative who was or is in jail or prison. This passage could today hold meaning for you because you are worried about a friend that is struggling with a pain pill addiction, alcoholism, or depression. This passage might bring up painful memories of a time when you were ridiculed by a Sunday School teacher, or sexually harassed or molested by an adult you trusted who was involved with a church in some way, be it as the priest or pastor, or a church or youth leader.

We come to the end of our Stewardship season, and I hope you have enjoyed hearing the stories of your fellow parishioners. I know I

have. Jack today has reminded us that we are all in this ministry together and that there is much work to be done.

If you are a sheep, let yourself be found and rescued by God the shepherd. If you are a sheep, let the Good Shepherd Jesus ignite in you the need and desire to be shepherds to the world. And if you see yourself as a goat, then I invite you to spend time in prayer and with me so that your heart may be softened and your hands may be unclenched and instead, outstretched to others, for the world needs you, too.

You all are the reason I get up on Sunday mornings, even on those days when I am tempted to pull those covers over my head and wish away the Spirit's call on my life. To me, you are God's beloved sheep, and every day, you teach me how to be a shepherd in the world. So, on this Thanksgiving weekend, let me just humbly say, I am thankful for all of you, for

*I was hungry and you fed me,
I was thirsty and you gave me a drink,
I was homeless and you gave me a room,
I was shivering and you gave me clothes,
I was sick and you stopped to visit,
I was in prison and you came to me.'*

May It Be So.