

## **9-27-2020 SERMON CCI Matthew 25:31-46 Faith Life of Sheep and Goats**

The writer Matthew seems so sure in this parable. To him, you're either a sheep or a goat. Those who help the poor, sick, imprisoned, are sheep and those who don't are goats. But following Jesus is not always that black and white for me. I'll give you two examples.

One Sunday morning on my way to work as chaplain at Judson Park Retirement Community, the traffic going west like me was stopped at a stop sign in downtown Kent. The cars going north kept taking their turns crossing the intersection, but we weren't moving and horns were honking. Finally, the car ahead of me swerved way over to the right and crossed the intersection and that's when I saw why- an elderly man in a wheelchair wearing no shoes was trying his best to cross the street going north, and since it was a hill, he was having real trouble. In an instant I knew what God was calling me to do. I put my car in park, walked over to the man and asked if he wanted some help up the hill. When he said yes, I pushed him the rest of the way across the street, horns honking at both of us now. Then I went on my way to work.

Second example: There was a time in our young adult son's life when he struggled to make it. He had no job and found it hard to go look, so he had been evicted from his apartment for not paying the rent, and he was living with one friend after another until each of them said they'd had enough, and he was quite unhappy. Numerous times Matt asked for money and we provided what he needed, invited him to live with us. But he didn't; and we realized we were providing the cushion that allowed him to not do what was needed to stand on his own two feet.

So the next time he asked for money, we said, "No" and gently explained why. Matt was furious, hung up, and we were heart-broken. It was only later when he turned his life around, that he told us that that hard decision we had made was the best thing we ever did for him because it got him finally going. He had a job, shared an apartment, and even had a girlfriend. By the time Matt died, he was happily getting all A's in the college tech program and engaged to be married.

So which am I- a sheep or a goat? Jesus' parable is a wake-up call to examine who we are and the choices we make.

The three parables just before today's scripture all focus on preparing for the return of Christ. In each parable there is a group of people who were faithfully prepared and a group who were not. In today's parable Christ has returned, and the nations are assembled before him because the time of reckoning has arrived.

The nations are all mingled together the way shepherds of that day mingled their sheep and goats as they grazed and rested in the fields. There wasn't a field marked Sheep and another field marked Goats; they grazed together all day until it was time for the shepherd to separate them for the night. That's the image in this parable. The head shepherd, the Son of Man, has come to separate the sheep and the goats.

So how will the Son of Man decide who is on the Sheep team? Jesus makes the criteria for being a sheep quite clear: <sup>35</sup>*For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in,* <sup>36</sup>*I needed*

*clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'* People who do such things get to be on the Sheep Team.

The people assigned to the Goat Team on the other hand, let hungry people go hungry. They didn't bother giving thirsty people anything to drink. They ignored the needs of strangers, letting them know that they were unwelcome. They didn't give clothes to people who need them, didn't care for the sick and lonely, and they let people rot in jail or prison with little thought. They may have been keeping a watch out for the coming of the King, but they failed to see the King already around them in the people in need. They would have gladly served King Jesus royally with the best they had, but they never expected to see him dressed in the unkingly clothing of beggars, sick, poor, or strangers. They didn't know they were blind goats.

The sheep didn't know they were sheep either. In fact, they were surprised to find out they were sheep! *'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink?'*<sup>38</sup> *'When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you?'*<sup>39</sup> *'When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'* They just saw people in need and helped them. The sheep were just living lives of faith the way that they had always done. Serving others comes natural when we're truly following Jesus. We see Jesus in the eyes of "the least of these," the dry lips of the thirsty, the stranger longing for a life at our borders and in our cities and neighborhoods, we hear him calling in the growling stomachs of the hungry, the sick and the lonely, and those in prisons- whether made of concrete, declining bodies, or mental illness. Sheep treat others the way the shepherd treats them.

This parable is one of the last teachings Jesus gives before he goes to the cross in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus will soon be the epitome of "one of the least of these"- he will soon go hungry, he will be thirsty but all he will get is sour vinegar to drink, his clothes will be taken from him, he will be treated as an unwanted stranger, his wounds will go untended, and no one will protest his unjust death. At the end of his earthly ministry, Jesus is calling people who claim to be his disciples and supporters to ask themselves, "Am I choosing to serve Jesus by serving others or myself?"

Which brings me back to my original question- am I a sheep or a goat? Sometimes I've said yes to those in need and sometimes I've said no. Does serving Jesus mean always saying yes? Episcopal priest, Father Michael Marsh, says to consider what our choice is based on. Is my choice whether to help someone based on their life story or mine? You know, do they have bad habits I don't want to support- like smoking, drugs, or alcohol addiction? Am I less inclined to help someone because of their unwashed clothes, bad odor, or different language while I'm glad to help someone who looks and talks more like me? How many of us, when the person ahead of us at Safeway is using food stamps, we judge their grocery purchases? Father Marsh invites us to make our choices based on who **we are**, not who the person in need is. What would a beloved child of God do in the situation? When we do, sometimes we will choose yes and other times we will choose no. But every time we will choose in favor of the least of these, not against them.

"The least of these" are all around us, sometimes in our own families. Sometimes we are the ones in need which helps keep us humble. And Jesus calls his sheep to see him standing with those in need. It's what he did when he was here on earth, "Blessed are the poor, those

who hunger and thirst, those who mourn,” and he has still does today. Do we see him? This congregation is generous in giving to “the least of these,” supporting the homeless who are living at Tent City 4, collecting men’s coats for the Union Gospel Mission, Christmas gifts for a family, money to provide counseling for those who lost everything in the Paradise fire. We take these sacred opportunities to serve seriously.

This fall we have another sacred opportunity to serve those in need, **not** by giving, but by how we vote. Now I would never tell you which party to belong to or which candidates to vote for; contrary to what you may hear, Jesus has never chosen a political party as **his party**. But Jesus makes it clear in this parable **what** to use our vote for- to feed the hungry, provide for the healthcare needs of the sick, disabled, and injured, to welcome strangers at our borders and in our cities, and to care about those who are imprisoned or treated unjustly. It is a sacred opportunity we have to serve more of “the least of these” than we can personally touch. So get ready to vote. Please don’t choose not to vote- if you can’t vote wholeheartedly for a candidate, vote for the one with more policies that serve the least of these. May we stand with those hurting around us and vote on their behalf.

PRAYER Open our eyes, Lord, we want to see Jesus in the eyes of those hurting in our world. To reach out and touch them and say that we love them knowing when we do, we’re loving you. Open our ears, Lord, and help us to listen for their cries without flinching; Open our eyes, Lord, we want to see Jesus. Amen.