

Holy Hospitality, Batman!
Reign of ChristA
PPC
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Ezekiel 34:11-24
Matthew 25:31-46

Oh, brother, Jesus is at it again! My Bible gives the heading to this story from Matthew as “The Judgment of the Gentiles”. Yup - this is the end, my friends, and here’s what’s going down. Instead of Judge Judy we have Judge Jesus coming in full-blown apocalyptic glory, seated on a throne surrounded by angels. Not those rosy cheeked cherubs we usually think of, either, but those fire-breathing, clawed, horned kind. There, in front of him, will be all the nations. And (gulp) we are given a glimpse of those who get into heaven and those who don’t.

Holy Hospitality, Batman! What is going on here? I need more time!

First, Jesus, the shepherd, looks at the sheep on his right and affirms them. “You guys did great! When I was hungry you gave me food, when I was thirsty you gave me drink, you clothed me, you visited me in prison. Good job!” The sheep, in their sheeply way, look back at him blankly. “Huh? We don’t remember when we did all those things for you.” Jesus replies, “When you did it for the least of these, you did it for me.” If you’ve ever worked with sheep, you can imagine them shaking their heads, looking around at one another, confused. “What is he talking about?”

Then Jesus looks at the goats on his left. Instead of admiration, they get admonished! “Wow! You guys really messed up. I was hungry and you didn’t feed me. I was thirsty and you didn’t give me drink...” There is a long pause. Jesus continues. “You never visited me; you didn’t give me anything to wear.” The goats, being a bit sharper than the sheep, turn back to Jesus. “When did we *not* do these things? We

never even saw you!” “You didn’t do it for the least of these; you never did it for me.”
The goats look at each other, confused.

Who is this Son of Man who has the power to gather the nations before him but who, until that time, is most closely identified with “the least of them?” Why is that neither the sheep nor the goats have an understanding about the topic of discussion here? This is a narrative depiction of the last judgment and the call is to do right at all times. Perhaps we don’t need to use this as a way to separate “us” from “them”. Our task is to use these distinctions as a diagnostic tool. They are designed to inspire faithfulness, root out self-centered living, and help each of us measure who and where we are as we grow in the likeness of Christ.

If we’re honest with ourselves, don’t we have to admit that we’re often tempted to look at some people and think, “well, that person is definitely a goat.” This is what can happen when we focus too much on the separation of the sheep and the goats. It fits our human need to have clear division between who’s in and who’s out. We can then come up with an in/out scale. We can accuse Muslims or Jews of being goats. We appoint ourselves as judge.

Elaine Pagels says Jesus’ words are the basis for a radical new social structure based on the God given dignity and value of every human being. Human beings are not to be tortured and abused, not because they are wonderful but because Jesus is there with them. God dwells in the ambiguity and messiness of life. In a world that seems too big to be changed, our lives have more meaning and value than we imagine. Do we imagine that because we determine a person is a goat that we don’t need to care about that person?

From the standpoint of reformed theology, we are all goats, for there is nothing we can do to earn salvation or a spot in the kingdom of heaven. If we are actually receiving the Son of Man when we serve the least, are we just serving others so that we will be received? How much are we actually concerned with those others or are we thinking more of our own salvation? Do desires, motives, or situations matter if judgment turns on our actions alone?

When I walked to work in NYC, every day I would be met by people asking for handouts. I began to feel guilty because I didn't have the time or the money to satisfy each beggar. Besides, how could I tell who was really needy and who simply wanted a bottle of cheap wine or a \$5 hit? What could I do? How much is *enough* to give? How many homeless people can I affect? Are we supposed to feel badly about what we have?

When I worked at the Miriam Family Resource Center, I was taught that I needed to look at each person who entered the Center as a person of worth. Maybe that is the key to what we are called to do. In our encounters with strangers, we are called to look into their faces and see there the Christ within. One commentator writes "growing antagonism and cooling love are among the most dangerous cancers facing followers of Christ." How we spend our time and whom we actively love and do not love are indicators of our faithfulness. Loving someone does not always mean giving them everything they want. We can recognize their worth as human beings, though.

Ezekiel describes God as a shepherd, too, whose love embraces most particularly the lean and oppressed among the flock. God will gather them up, restore them to health, and liberate them from persecution. The fat and aggressive sheep that

have “butted”, intimidated and ravaged the weak and the lean will receive their just desserts. Our call may be to recognize this happening in front of our eyes and to speak up for those who are voiceless. This isn’t some promise for a future heavenly date but instead is a clarion call for us to be aware when we see injustice. What can we do when we recognize the disproportionate number of young black men who are incarcerated? Is visiting them enough? Or do we need to work for a more just policing effort?

“Ezekiel’s words are particularly threatening to those who practice economic and relational oppression. They feast on green pastures now but will eventually receive divine judgment.”¹ These words from the prophet were a balm to the souls of those exiles, far away from home, wondering about the injustices perpetrated against them. They are a balm to those of us today who suffer injustice - racial, economic, and gender related - as we watch the super rich who buy legislators and legislation to protect their own interests.

Will we be safe on Judgment Day?

Jesus is telling us in Matthew that the division between sheep and goats is grounded in the interplay between action and perception. The sheep, honored by the shepherd, respond to those around them with generosity and care, not thinking such actions are special. Those responses are, to the sheep, merely a reflection of their commitment to healing relationships. They are driven by the desire to find healing and hope in their daily lives. Bruce Epperly, a noted pastor and theologian, writes “It is unclear that the division of sheep and goats has anything to do with our explicit

¹ Bruce G. Epperly at: <http://processandfaith.org/resources/lectionary-commentary/yeara2011>.

awareness of Christ or belonging to a particular faith tradition. Our relationship with God is grounded in our care for others, who are, in fact, God in God's many disguises."²

When we care for others, we are caring for God. The world truly matters to God: God's love for the world is revealed through God's empathy and experience of every cell and soul. Our lives are our gifts to God.

On this Sunday before Thanksgiving, it seems right and proper that we remember this. Who we welcome - this year in spirit only - at our tables is symbolic of what we are called to be as Christians. On that first Thanksgiving, after a harsh and cruel first year of low survival rates for the English, on these shores in a place named Plymouth by those English, gathered around the table were people who called themselves Christians. Alongside that table with the Puritans, but not seated at it, was a group of Wampanoag. Without the help of those Native Americans the English might not have survived at all. It was the Wampanoag who taught the immigrants about native agriculture and hunting. It is possible that those members of that Native American tribe, without knowing the English word for Christ, were the sheep of the story, the real Christians. They showed those early settlers how to build their shelters, what plants could be eaten, and what was worth hunting, such as the native turkey. They might not have known the word "Christ" but they understood what it means to feed the hungry, clothe the poor, and welcome the stranger.

² Ibid.

Faith awakens the perception of God in all things. It also gives us an ethical perspective that makes God the ultimate recipient of value as well as the universal source of all possibility and energy. Whoever we look at, we must find Christ in them.

It may not be all that important that we are able to identify who is a sheep and who is a goat. Jesus cares most about how we care for one another here on earth, particularly those on the margins. Let our caring be so much a part of who we are that we are not even conscious of doing anything extraordinary.

Jesus as king looks and acts nothing like the world's idea of a king. Our king is found in and with the least of our siblings. Our king walks with us, loves us lavishly, saves us, and invites us to be an active part of his reign here and now. Our king sits at table with the heroin addict, the alcoholic, the unwed mother on welfare, the soldier with PTSD.

People - get ready! It's the end of the church year but it's the beginning of a new day. We await the arrival of that king who comes to earth in the form of a child. May we await his arrival with great anticipation understanding that he comes to us in love and joy, hope and peace.

AMEN.