

The truth is most of us are not sheep or goats but GEEP – the cross between sheep and goats. Sometimes I am compassionate enough to see Christ in “the least of these” and other times I just have my eyes on me and mine. It has been said by many Biblical and theological scholars that Jesus identifies himself with the poor, the hungry, the sick, and the oppressed. At the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus quotes from Isaiah, announcing “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, proclaiming the year of the Lord’s favor.” In his first recorded sermon, he begins with “Blessed are the poor, the weeping, the meek, the hungry...” And as he is completing his ministry, the last words in Matthew before the chief priests and elder plot to kill him, he announces the Great Judgment of the Nations, also sometimes called the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats. This vision describes the return of Christ with all the angels. It is the final judgment after three chapters (Matthew 23-25) of harsh judgment of the scribes and Pharisees, of all who are not ready for Christ to come, and all have not risked giving their all for Christ’s sake. It immediately precedes the announcement of the plot to kill Jesus. This is Christ the King Sunday, and this image of the coming of the King, also called the Son of Man, or the Human One rightly wakes us up. We are called to be like Christ and to see Christ in others, who are made in his image.

Matthew 25:31-46

"Now when the Human One comes in his majesty and all his angels are with him, he will sit on his majestic throne. ³² All the nations will be gathered in front of him. He will separate them from each other, just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ He will put the sheep on his right side. But the goats he will put on his left. ³⁴ "Then the king will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who will receive good things from my Father. Inherit the kingdom that was prepared

for you before the world began. ³⁵ I was hungry and you gave me food to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. ³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothes to wear. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me.' ³⁷ "Then those who are righteous will reply to him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink?' ³⁸ When did we see you as a stranger and welcome you, or naked and give you clothes to wear?' ³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' ⁴⁰ "Then the king will reply to them, 'I assure you that when you have done it for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you have done it for me.' ⁴¹ "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Get away from me, you who will receive terrible things. Go into the unending fire that has been prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴² I was hungry and you didn't give me food to eat. I was thirsty and you didn't give me anything to drink. ⁴³ I was a stranger and you didn't welcome me. I was naked and you didn't give me clothes to wear. I was sick and in prison, and you didn't visit me.' ⁴⁴ "Then they will reply, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and didn't do anything to help you?' ⁴⁵ Then he will answer, 'I assure you that when you haven't done it for one of the least of these, you haven't done it for me.' ⁴⁶ And they will go away into eternal punishment. But the righteous ones will go into eternal life." (CEB)

Video of Matthew 25 from the The Work of the People (guy bagging up Christmas boxes and wrapping paper with the questions of the final judgment)....

The Christ we see in Matthew is all about how you live. Remember last week, the harsh Parable of the Talents – If you are given a gift from God -- use it or lose it. And now this one – get on with caring for the down and out as if they are Christ himself. There is no cheap grace here. It's kind of like James who said, "Faith without works is dead." In Matthew, Jesus says, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." (Matt 5:20) He says, "Not everyone who says 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but those who do the will of my Father in heaven." (Matt. 7:21) So we are welcomed by grace, but not excused by grace to live however the way we want, while this little one struggles.

It is significant to note that Jesus said, the least of these who are my brothers and sisters. Jesus said in another place, “Who are my family members -- but those who do the will of God.”

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So the least of these who are my brothers and sisters, are the poor, hungry, sick, and imprisoned people of God. As Son of Man, he could be referring to all people, but more likely, when he speaks of his brothers and sisters, he means those who are faithful to God. The early church was being persecuted, so Christians were nearly all either poor, hungry, sick or in prison.

So we've identified the ones we most need to provide loving care. But have we identified who Jesus is dividing into sheep and goats? The Greek word, *ethne*, translated here nations can be translated people, and can be a way of speak of the Gentiles, all the people who are not Jewish. It is the same word he uses at the end of Matthew, when he says, “Make disciples of all nations” Some have said, this interpretation means that unbelievers (the nations) who treat believers well will be sheep, and those who have treated Christians poorly are goats.

And the next thing we must notice is the surprise of both goats and sheep. When did we visit the prisoner? (slide) It is as if the sheep have been so sheep-like in following the Shepherd, they do not know what they have done – did not do it to earn their righteousness. Meanwhile, those who were busy being goat-like (doing whatever they want) equally never noticed that they could have been serving, helping, caring for Christ.

Lastly we must also talk about that word “eternal” which is the same root as our word, *eon*. It is used in Romans to refer to “long ages” and to the eternal God, and in Hebrews to talk about eternal covenant of God. It seems sometimes to mean forever and sometimes to mean an indefinite length of time. Either way, I'd rather be a sheep. Please help me, O Lord my Shepherd. This is a tough passage, one that makes most of us tremble a bit. And so we should. We should tremble with gratitude for Christ's gift of grace. Christ is our loving Shepherd. He says he will go after us when we are lost in Luke.

In John, he says that he lays down his life for his sheep, and that there are other sheep, outside the fold that he must bring too, and that they will listen to his voice. He calls us his sheep. We must follow him or be lost. If we are too busy doing our own thing – being goats, then we are not following the Shepherd, the King, the one in charge.

Let me say it again – the sheep did not line up and say to the King, “See, I took care of all the marginalized people. I cared about the refugees. (slide) I gave food every time we had a food drive at church. I always handed money to homeless people on the street.” No. Good sheep just live their lives focused on the Shepherd, trusting the Shepherd, seeing people and helping them. They are not trying to earn their way to kingdom of heaven. They are genuinely caring for their neighbor, not selfishly using their neighbor to earn their way to eternal life. For that kind of egotistical falsehood would never cut it with the King. Loving our neighbor in order to achieve something for ourselves (like giving to the church solely to improve your tax burden) is not real love or generosity.

If we are truly generous, we do not even recognize it in ourselves. We are not thinking of ourselves at all. We are seeing Christ, loving Christ in the other. So to worry too much about how to grow wool and be a sheep instead of a goat is to get this story all wrong. Jesus is talking about a way of life, and not one that is motivated by fear of hell or hope of heaven, but driven by authentic Christ-like love. So, instead of worrying about when Christ is coming, let’s get on with preparing to meet him. Instead of worrying about whether we are sheep or a goats, let’s get on with following him. Instead of worrying about when we should help and when we should not help, we need simply to cultivate the courage to see Christ in other people. Remember the words of the Lord’s Prayer. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done – on earth as it is in heaven. We are praying not for an escape from this world but that the ways of Christ would be emulated so well on earth that life on earth becomes heavenly. Sometimes that is hard to imagine, isn’t it? But it is possible when in our lives, we are glorifying God. Jesus said to Peter, “Peter, do you love me?” “Yes, Lord, of course I do.” “Then feed my lambs. Tend my sheep.” In the allegory of the long spoon (show video) it is clear that it is far better when we focus on caring for one another. (video)