

November 22nd, 2020

Matthew 25:31-46 “Calling All Sheep”

This is our last Sunday before Advent if you can believe it. That means next Sunday we start a brand new church year. I know last week I joked that we're pretending 2020 didn't happen by having this year's leaders just carry their term over into 2021. Honestly though, as challenging as it's been for us logistically, we've been doing pretty well staying faithful and staying connected. Since we've been under COVID restrictions and out of the building, we've studied the Gospel of John and other writings from the John Tradition and how it relates to the shift we are experiencing as the Reign of God is breaking through in our world. Then we moved on to reclaiming the words and teachings of Jesus which had quite a few parables concerning the Kingdom of God too. From there we moved on to the Book of Exodus and learned how God challenged the most powerful Empire in the ancient world and won. Throughout Advent Season we're going to be focusing on Jesus as an unexpected gift to an uncertain world.

The last Sunday of the Church year ... today ... is known as “Christ the King Sunday.” The scripture we have in front of us this morning is commonly known as, “the parable of the sheep and the goats.” I've preached on this text before. You all know how I feel about goats and how I don't like that this parable portrays the goats as losers in the game of life. But hey, goats get no respect, right? Even in the metaphorical language of our culture, we refer to cantankerous people as, “Old Goats.” If you tease another person to the point where they lose their temper, we say, “Looks like someone got his goat!” The Regional Minister in Virginia would often get calls from clergy who were feeling sort of ganged up on at their churches, and he'd tell them, “Hey, don't let the goats eat your garden.”

So yes, clearly the sheep in this parable are the one's who "are blessed by the Father" and who will "inherit the kingdom prepared for them from the foundations of the world." The goats? They are labeled "accursed." Poor goats. I've been to churches that will tell you this passage is all about comparing folks who are Christians to those who aren't Christians. And I see where they get this idea too. As followers of Christ, we look to Jesus as our "good shepherd."

The Old Testament text from the lectionary this week is from Ezekiel and is very closely related to what Mary read from the gospel text. That's why I had Joe read it where we usually hear our Psalm. Ezekiel says, "I shall judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and goats: Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture? When you drink of clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet? And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have fouled with your feet?"

We see this shepherd image in other Old Testament passages too. Psalm 23 says, "The Lord is our shepherd." Psalm 100 says, "We are the sheep of his pasture." Earlier on in Matthew's gospel, chapter 9, it says that Jesus had pity for the sick and lost who came to him because, "they are like sheep without a shepherd." Okay, we get it! We the followers of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the followers of Christ, are like sheep. We are part of God's flock.

But let me shed a new light on this passage. It does *not* refer to individuals. This is not about how one person in the room is a sheep, and another person in the room is a goat, and then The Son of Man pats one on the head and throws the other in the furnace. And believe me I've heard a lot of sermons about how you better not be a goat ... or else. So let's see what this is about. Now, a lot of Bible translators and Bible Publishers assign titles for

different sections of scripture. My Bible labels this section, “The Judgement of the Nations.”

The judgment of ... the NATIONS. Not individuals. Matthew has Jesus saying, “All the *nations* will be gathered before The Son of Man.” So what’s at stake here is how a *nation* treats its hungry. How a *nation* treats its thirsty. How a *nation* treats “strangers.” “Stranger,” by the way, is the word that many Bible translators use to translate the Greek word, “xenon.” That’s where we get the word “xenophobia” which according to Webster’s means, “an unreasonable fear or hatred of foreigners.” The issues is how a *nation* treats its “naked.” How a *nation* treats its sick. How a *nation* treats its imprisoned. Puts a different perspective on how we identify and label the sheep and goats doesn’t it? So the question isn’t so much “Are you a sheep or a goat as an individual.” It’s more like, “Do you live in a sheep nation or a goat nation?” How does your *nation* treat the hungry, and the thirsty, and the foreigners, and the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned?

Now before you breathe a sigh of relief and say, “Whew! Thank goodness it’s not about me as an individual!” think about where you live. Well, I live on a *road* called Washington Avenue, in the *town* of Chico, in the *County* of Butte, in the *State* of California, on the Pacific Coast *Region* of ... a *nation*. The United States of America. A nation where part of our pledge (well ... our pledge as it was amended in 1954) includes the phrase, “One nation under God.” So if I’m a citizen of a nation (and we all are) I have to ask myself, “Do I live in a sheep nation or a goat nation?” And even if I consider myself as an individual to be a “sheep in God’s pasture,” am I going to be judged because I’m a part of a “goat nation” since this passage is about the *judgment* of the *nations*? Something worth thinking about. Something worth talking about. Especially when you consider that a nation is the sum of it’s people ... the sum of it’s individuals. So it would be a mistake to say that this is

just about the nations and not about *us*. *Nations* won't change unless the *people* change. And if we want people to be changed, then the change needs to begin *with us*. So yeah, I guess when you come down to it, we *do* have to turn the magnifying glass on ourselves. How are we to treat the hungry, the sick, the strangers, the naked and the imprisoned?

Well ... I have to confess, I sure don't have all the answers to those questions. But I am saying that finding our way to the answers will begin with recognizing and contemplating the Christ revealed to us in and through the hungry, the sick, the strangers, the naked and the imprisoned whom we encounter. Next time you find yourself haunted by an image of someone in need, whether it's someone who asked you for a dollar on the street or someone you saw malnourished, take that image with you to prayer. Spend some time asking God to show you how Christ was present in that person ... how that person reveals more of who Jesus is. It's that deep, prayerful understanding and recognition of what's going on around us and where God is that's the first step in becoming a "nation of sheep." And when you and I spend a bit more time becoming aware of those "Jesus moments" we are far more likely to begin to see how and where the reign of God under Christ the King can begin with *us*.