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Matthew 25:31-46  
November 26, 2017

### **“Are You a Sheep or a Goat?”**

“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door.”

Do those words sound familiar? They are words inscribed on the Statue of Liberty.

And I wonder if we Americans believe that any more. Do we really want the world’s huddled masses yearning to be free?

Our text for this morning is must reading if you do ... and maybe even more important if you don’t!

Do you remember the film *The Life of Brian*? I haven’t seen it, but I believe it’s about a next-door neighbor of Jesus – who is mistaken for Jesus.

While Brian is being crucified, his followers hold an emergency meeting. There’s a lot of fuss about who will take the minutes.

They jostle for position, anxious to show that they take a different line from the Judaeen People’s Popular Liberation Front and they pass a motion condemning the crucifixion.

But, nothing gets done. It’s all talk.

Unfortunately, so much religion is all talk. Our gospel reading this morning condemns people who never do anything.

While the General Assembly of our denomination passes motions about immigration, third world debt and so on; all good stuff springing directly out of this parable about the imprisoned, the stranger, the hungry ... there are some people who actually roll their sleeves up and do something more than just talking.

Often, they don't go to church, rarely say their prayers, but they visit housebound people, sponsor children in third world countries so that they can get an education, work for Amnesty International and much more.

They are the ones who are welcomed in the parable. They don't see themselves as anything special. They ask, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, naked and clothe you?"

And Jesus says that when you did it to the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me.

As Augustine, an early church father, put it: "Many whom God has, the Church does not have; and many whom the church has, God does not have."

Our text from Matthew is one of those apocalyptic passages that the "Left Behind types" love to quote, the separating of the sheep from goats.

Someone is going to be a sheep and go to heaven and the majority of us sinners will be goats sent to burn in the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

Yikes!

What's the basis, the criteria, the judgment on which Jesus is making this separation? Who becomes a sheep? Who becomes a goat? And why?

Are the sheep those who voted a straight Republican ticket? Are the goats the Democrats? I hope not!

Are the sheep those people who only used the New International Version or the King James Version of the bible?

Is it those who keep God in a neat and tidy box, and accept only those who look just like them?

I don't think so.

The first thing to notice about those who are hungry is this. To be hungry is to be in Greek: *peinao* – someone who is literally famished, someone who's got a distended belly because they are starving to death.

It doesn't mean poor in spirit. There's another Greek word for that.

And according to Jesus, Christian love begins in those places where people are literally starving to death.

It's very simple. There is no good news where people are starving to death.

Now when it comes to *dipsao*, the Greek word for thirsty. It can mean both literal thirst and figurative thirst.

This word can apply to all of us. Have you ever felt like your faith has dried up?

Have you ever felt like God was absent? Then you have experienced *dipsao* – thirst.

What about being a *xenos*, where we get the word xenophobia from (a fear of strangers)?

In Jesus' day, this was anyone who wasn't Jewish. The Gentiles were strangers. Who are the strangers in our midst?

Maybe, the illegals that are in our country would be a good place to look for what Jesus is talking about here.

And then there are those who are naked – *gumnos*, which means to be exposed or without protection.

And here clothing the naked is about much more than merely giving someone a garment. It's about covering someone's shame by being their protector.

And finally, we are to visit those who are *astheneo*, sick, weak, infirmed, feeling powerless and those who are incarcerated.

And this one is a harder one for us because most of us do not know what it's like to be guilty or assumed to be guilty and have everyone who you thought was your friend or family member shun you.

But this is precisely why it makes Jesus' list, because he's been found guilty even though he wasn't.

I could do a whole sermon about my experiences with those in prison, but I will save that for another day.

And this should bring us full circle, because unless we see ourselves as being a mixture of the goats and the sheep, we run the risk of becoming, as someone updated the text for our 21<sup>st</sup> century sensibilities puts it:

Then, the King said:

I was hungry and you told me that it was my own fault for being lazy and believing that I was entitled to help from hard working families and that I'd probably spent all of my money on alcohol, cigarettes and drugs anyway.

I was thirsty and you assumed that I was desperate for gin or vodka, rather than water.

I was naked and you said that I would have more chance of a job if I took more care of my personal appearance, even though I wore all I could afford.

I was poor and you told me I was a someone who just wanted to sponge off the state and put stories about me on the tv and newspapers, despite knowing nothing about my circumstances.

I was sick and you denied me any help, told me to go back to work and assumed I was faking illness.

I was in prison and you demanded that the key be thrown away and that I was to be kept away from all respectable, law-abiding members of society because I was a bad person who would never change.

I was a stranger and you ran, scared of me, told me to go home, that your country was full and that I was only there to steal your money, possessions and jobs.

And Jesus said, "For I tell you, whenever you did this for one of the least of these brothers or sisters of mine, you did it to me."

Can you see yourself as a goat ... at least sometimes? Me, too! :(

Some of our failure to reach those in need is our lack of awareness.

Maybe we fail to realize what even the smallest of effort can do for those who are desperate such as the hungry, the homeless, and the imprisoned.

Maybe we have been too quick to judge them for their situation instead of investing ourselves and our resources to change that situation.

Maybe our failure comes from not even being willing to start, since these issues seem so great.

But, notice the vision doesn't say the sheep reached everyone but they did reach someone.

For remember the sheep were surprised also. The good they did was not to gain favor or position or recognition. It was their response to what God had done and was doing in their lives.

And, I believe that it is also, in the context of our text, that we are to struggle with the issues and impact of immigration. There are truly strangers in our midst.

How easy it is to ignore them, or to blame them. As we said the goats in our vision would in all likelihood have been guilty of not even seeing the stranger.

The challenge is not only to see them but to see them as brothers and sisters. The challenge is to see Christ in them and to gather them in.

I can hear Jesus asking this question today, were he sharing these same sentiments with his disciples in Silicon Valley and throughout the United States:

“The Lord will say to those on his left, I came seeking a better life, and you deported me.

“And we will ask, but Lord when did we ever try to deport you?”

In the children’s movie *Whistle Down the Wind*, Haley Mills and her friends stumble across a vagrant sleeping in the straw, while they are playing in a country barn.

The frightened children shout, “Who are you?”

The shocked vagrant replied, “Jesus Christ.”

What the man meant as an expletive, the children took as a fact. They thought the man was Jesus Christ.

So, they treated him with awe, respect and love. They brought him food and blankets; they talked with him, and listened to his story.

Their tenderness transformed this ex-convict's life and opened his eyes to the Lord. We need to see Jesus.

So, as we reflect on Jesus' charge to us, we need to remember that we are judged not by our membership in a church but rather what we do for others, not by what we know but what we have shared.

Both the sheep and goats will be judged not by their creeds, but by their deeds.

John Wesley eloquently advised people to:

"Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, to all the people you can, as long as you ever can."

I have told this story before in a sermon but I think it bears repeating.

A holy man was having a conversation with the Lord one day and said, "Lord, I would like to know what Heaven and Hell are like."

The Lord led the holy man to two doors. He opened one of the doors and the holy man looked in.

In the middle of the room was a large round table. In the middle of the table was a large pot of stew which smelled delicious and made the holy man's mouth water.

The people sitting around the table were thin and sickly. They appeared to be famished.

They were holding spoons with very long handles and each found it possible to reach into the pot of stew and take a spoonful, but because the handle was longer than their arms, they could not get the spoons back into their mouths.

The holy man shuddered at the sight of their misery and suffering.

The Lord said, "You have seen Hell."

They went to the next room and opened the door. It was exactly the same as the first one.

There was the large round table with the large pot of stew which made the holy man's mouth water.

The people were equipped with the same long-handled spoons, but here the people were well nourished and plump, laughing and talking.

The holy man said, "I don't understand."

It is simple" said the Lord, "it requires but one skill. You see, they have learned to feed each other."

And that's what we are called to do ... feed one another, clothe one another, visit one another... love one another.

Someone asked, "But, am I to be my brother's keeper?" The answer is no. That rings of manipulation and control.

I am my brother's brother ... for Jesus is a brother to us all!

*Amen!*