



“Could it Be Jesus?”
Scripture – Matthew 25:31-46
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, November 25, 2018

[Facing congregation and pointing right]: Sheep! (pointing left): Goats!

[Facing the chancel and pointing right]: Or is it Sheep? (pointing left): Goats? It is difficult to tell.

Each of us wants to be counted among the sheep, but, I confess I sympathize with the goats. If they had known they were being set up, they would have responded differently. If Jesus had not put on those clever disguises the goats would have welcomed him with warm hospitality and lavished him with a flannel-lined robe and perky new Birkenstocks. I’m certain they would have fed him some traditional Middle East dishes – such as turkey and dressing and pumpkin pie. They would have offered a full-bodied Cabernet or a buttery Chardonnay.

If they had known it was Jesus who was in prison, they would have visited him.

If they had heard Jesus was ill, they would have nursed him back to health. The goats should have protested about the prank Jesus played on them. “Jesus, why all the deception and disguises? We did not recognize you.”

Homiletics professor Fred Craddock was an amazing preacher. He was constantly being invited to speak at congregations around the country. One time, he preached four consecutive evenings at a large church and each night, the sanctuary was packed. Similar to our service, the liturgy included a Passing of Peace. Craddock said he had never seen such hugging and laughing and carrying on. People would cross the sanctuary to take hold of someone’s hand.

After the final service of the week, the senior pastor took Fred and his wife out for coffee and after Craddock mentioned what he had noticed during the Passing of Peace, the pastor smiled and said, “Have you ever seen such a warm and loving church?”

Craddock’s wife spoke up. She said, “Well, I have.”

The pastor replied, “Really?”

And she said, “I was there for all four services, and no one ever spoke to me.”

Do you know what the pastor said in response? “Well, that’s because they didn’t know who you were.”¹ That is the same song the goats sang. We did not recognize you.

Parents of young children, I would not recommend you reading this passage to little ones at bedtime. It lacks the warmth and beauty of the wolf and the lamb snuggling with each other.

Matthew paints a vision of Judgment Day and the scene is riveting. Jesus sits atop a throne and people are gathered before him. And like an ancient shepherd who, at dusk, would separate the sheep from the goats, Jesus separates the people into two groups. And once they are divided, Jesus says to the sheep, “You are the blessed ones; you are the ones who inherit God’s kingdom; because my stomach was swollen with hunger and you fed me. I was dirty and parched and you gave me a drink I was unknown and spoke a foreign language, but you welcomed me. I was so poor that I was wearing tissue-thin clothes from the Goodwill store, and you clothed me. I was sick with a fever and you took care of me. I was in prison, embarrassed by the bright orange jumpsuit and you visited me.”

And the response of this group is fascinating. They do not exchange high-fives and perform a choreographed end zone celebration. Instead, they are baffled. There is a puzzled look on their faces as they ask: “Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger?”

Christ responds with those powerful words that have thundered down through the centuries: “Whenever you did it to the least of these, you did it to me.” A core conviction of Christianity is writ large for all to see: whenever we help someone we touch the very life of Christ. And as the passage continues, we discover that the reverse is also true. Whenever we fail to care for someone in need, we snub Christ.

This passage rattles the theology of anyone who thinks that all that matters is what you believe. Did you catch what doctrines you are supposed to embrace in order to be a sheep rather than a goat? The passage does not mention a single word. Christ separates sheep from goats not on the basis of what we believe but on how we treat people.

The Scriptures are clear that God loves us and forgives us and guides us to a rich life. And with that assurance of divine comfort, it might come as a shock that God also judges. Like a parent who is furious with her child when he lies or takes drugs or disrespects others, God is outraged when we neglect to help people who are hurting.

Why did the goats find themselves on the wrong side of the line of demarcation? Had they become so self-absorbed that they simply no longer noticed when others were in need? Had they filled their calendars to such an extent that even when they wanted to help, they could not fit it in? Did they blame others for their plight and judge them unworthy of help?

For our personal safety and to protect our ego, we are quick to size up people. When we encounter others, a voice goes off in our mind, “He’s a bigot, she’s an airhead, this one is a con, that one is a control freak, he’s a backstabber, she’s an addict.”

Jesus cautioned us about passing judgments on others while having amnesia about our own less than sterling tendencies. He asked how we could possess laser-like focus on the speck in our neighbor’s eye, while remaining oblivious to the log in our own eye. (Matthew 7:2-3)

Centuries before the rise of the field of psychology, Jesus realized that people tend to see in others what they fear about themselves. When we label someone an airhead, is it because we harbor doubts about the depth of our own wisdom? When we accuse someone of being a control freak, could we be drawing attention away from the ways we try to dominate?

It is unrealistic to imagine that we can simply erase the evaluations we make of others. However, it is possible to temper our judgments by adjusting the lens of our microscope. We want people to have sympathy for our shortcomings, why not generate the same for others?

Followers of Jesus are intended to view the world from a unique viewpoint. When we come into contact with others, rather than passing a critical judgment and acting accordingly, we are to treat that person as we would treat Jesus. What joy would we ignite in our soul if when we see someone in need, instead of lecturing ourselves of the need to perform an act of charity, we embrace it as an opportunity to touch the heart of God?

In her book, *Beyond Belief*, Princeton Professor Elaine Pagels writes that what made the early church so compelling to outsiders was not its theology, but its radical love for people who were hurting. Followers of Jesus adopted babies who had been abandoned. They shared food and medicine with prisoners. They bought coffins, dug graves and provided a dignified burial for the destitute whose bodies would have been dumped outside of the city. And when the plague ravaged communities throughout the Roman Empire, they shocked their pagan neighbors by caring for the sick and dying, putting themselves at risk of catching the deadly disease. They did not ask if a person was a fellow Christian, they did not ask if the person shared the same political opinions, they did not question whether someone deserved help. They simply treated each person as if he or she were Jesus.

A friend had a mentally ill brother who pulled away from the family and from time to time dropped off the family's radar. She wanted to help him, but he rejected her pleading and moved more than a thousand miles away. Part of the time he lived out of his car, other times in the lowest income housing available. She helped him financially, but was frustrated by not being able to do more for him. So, she focused on local people who needed help and imagined them as her brother. And she prayed that as she was there for a stranger, someone else many miles away would be there for her brother. That is the sort of thing that Jesus is calling each of us to do.

As I pondered this passage, I thought about our church family and whether Jesus would welcome us as sheep or dispatch us to the land of goats. Here is what I heard:

I was hungry and you volunteered to serve hot meals,
I was thirsty and you purchased filters to cleanse my water,
I was ill and you accompanied me to the doctor,
I was temporarily homeless and you housed me in your classrooms,
I was a refugee fleeing danger and you settled me in your country,
I was lonely and you brought me flowers,
I was in danger of dropping out of school and you mentored me,
I was addicted and you provided recovery programs for me,
I was oppressed and forgotten and you brought attention to my plight,
I was a victim of discrimination and you stood up for me,
I was grieving and you wept with me.

No gesture of compassion is too small, no stand for justice is pointless, and no act of generosity is insignificant, because every loving gesture to a fellow human being is felt in the heart of God.

The next time you encounter someone in need, peer closely into the person's eyes. It might not be who you think it is.

NOTES

1. Shannon Kershner, "When Did We See You," November 23, 2017.

Prayers of the People – Gregory Knox Jones

Most Sundays, the Prayers of the People are offered by a pastor on behalf of our congregation. Most of today's prayer is literally the prayers of the people because it is comprised of the blessings you wrote on the "Give Thanks" cards the previous Sunday. The four things you most frequently mentioned were family, friends, health, and our church.

Energy of the universe and Composer of creation, we pause to give you thanks. Much of the time we receive the gifts that flow our way and simply take them without recognizing the source of all gifts. But in this moment, we express the meditations of our hearts.

Gracious God, we give thanks for family and the love, support, and laughter we share. Thank you for healthy and happy children, an amazing husband, and sweet parents. Thank you for my wonderful wife, our terrific grandchildren, for family weddings and upcoming births. Thank you for my loving partner, and for beautiful friends who are there when most needed. Thank you for the many years of love my husband gave me, and for the many friends who have comforted me since his recent death.

Eternal God, we give thanks for advances in medicine, good medical care and skilled doctors; for the ability to put both feet on the ground and walk – although very slowly. We give thanks for a job we enjoy, a safe home and neighborhood, a prosperous life and the opportunity to be together during the holidays.

Loving God, we give thanks for our spiritual home – an oasis of enrichment, a vibrant church with a wonderful staff, a caring church that acts like a family in my life, the love I feel when I come, and for opportunities for Christian service.

Everlasting God, we express our gratitude for food, shelter, singing, 180 youth group, sunrises and sunsets. We are grateful for school, for Cokesbury, for fantastic dogs, for phones and for Netflix. We are grateful for this country from coast to coast, for freedom, and for the election season being over.

Life giving Spirit, we are grateful for Jesus and the gift of salvation, for your forgiveness, enduring love, and the promise of eternal life.

Gracious God, when we pause to focus on the things for which we give you thanks, we become aware that there is an endless list of blessings. May we set aside time each day to express our thanks to you knowing that a grateful heart generates peace, love, and joy in our soul.

Now, hear us as we pray as Jesus taught us to pray together:

Our Father, who art in Heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen.