

## *Sheep and Goats*

**Ephesians 1:20-23** <sup>20</sup> God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, <sup>21</sup> far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. <sup>22</sup> And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, <sup>23</sup> which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

**Matthew 25:31-40** <sup>31</sup> "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. <sup>32</sup> All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, <sup>33</sup> and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. <sup>34</sup> Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; <sup>35</sup> for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, <sup>36</sup> I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' <sup>37</sup> Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? <sup>38</sup> And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? <sup>39</sup> And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' <sup>40</sup> And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

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Back in seminary, it was suggested to us that we should think about what scripture really resonated with us. It should come as no surprise that Micah 6:8 is one such passage for me. "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8 NRS) It is a text that speaks great wisdom in plain English. One can grasp what is said immediately, although it can take a lifetime to see all of the ramifications and to try to live out what is required of us.

Similarly, today's passage from Matthew is another favorite of mine, for the same reasons. In order to be a parable, the story must have an unexpected twist. And this passage has several twists. The king separates people like a shepherd separates sheep from goats. The goats are gathered at the king's left hand and the sheep are gathered at his right hand. The king turns to the sheep and tells them how wonderful they have been. They have fed him, clothed him, welcomed him although he was a stranger, and visited him in prison. The sheep people are flabbergasted. "When did we ever do those things? We don't recall seeing you in prison or feeding you." There is the surprise. Here comes the twist. When you did these things to the least members of my family, you did them to me.

That's really powerful. That will make you sit down and think of all of the ramifications. But the parable doesn't stop there. It doesn't leave the opposite behavior just insinuated. Matthew wants to make sure that we understand the reverse side of this coin. The king turns to the goats, the people at his left, and says I was hungry, naked, and in prison and you didn't care for my needs. The goats are just as surprised as the sheep were. They respond, "When was that?" You can just picture some of the folks among the goats thinking, "There's been a mistake. I don't belong with these turkeys who were too dumb to offer food to the King when he was hungry. What idiots! If I had seen the King

and he was hungry, you can bet your bottom dollar that I would have fed him a sumptuous meal.” And so the goats want to know when it was that they were so slack in meeting the king’s needs. Then comes the twist. If you didn’t care for the least members of my family, you didn’t care for me.

Neither the sheep nor the goats deny their behavior. No, but they are surprised that they had failed to recognize the king. To fine tune this a bit, they were surprised by where the king hangs out! In the musical Camelot, the opening scene is of the King singing a little song, “I wonder what the common folk are doing tonight?” We expect our kings to be somewhat detached from everyday life, especially everyday life at the bottom of the heap. So in this parable, the Sheep and the goats are both surprised by the way the king identifies with, not the high born rich, but with the least, the lowest of the people.

This passage confronts how we picture God. We sing, “Immortal, invisible, God only wise.” We think of God as all-knowing, omnipresent and omnipotent. Fair enough, but we mustn’t stop there. Because the one who was God-with-us, the one hailed as Emmanuel, didn’t arrive in Athens or Rome, but came as a vulnerable infant born in an insignificant village to insignificant parents. God-with-us didn’t conquer the world using the traditional methods of military and political might, but instead conquered the world through the scandal, the shame, and the pain of the cross. Jesus spent little time with the prosperous and the powerful and lots of time with those who were the neediest and who were powerless.

We usually think of meeting God in the sweet bye and bye, but this parable is all about meeting God here and now. Mother Theresa said that she tried to see the face of Jesus in everyone she met and that’s part of what this parable of sheep and goats is about.

It’s also interesting to take note of what this passage is not about. The sheep and the goats are not sorted based on worship style or beliefs. There’s no mention of whether worship music was loud and full of praise or soft and reverent. There’s no sorting based on whether you use wine or grape juice for communion. There’s no definition of sheep and goats based on what clothing was worn to worship.

Those who can explain the doctrine of the Trinity and recite the Ten Commandments are not immediately classed as sheep. As part of the sorting process the sheep don’t have to explain atonement. There’s no litmus test to determine if you believe in the five fundamentals. No one has to declare a preference for one creation account over another, or explain which flood story is the truth.

What this passage does say is that we will find our Lord in acts of compassion, in loving our neighbor as ourselves. What a simple message. But it takes a great deal of thought and love to implement it fully into our life. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Christ can be found where the need is greatest.  
Your compassion and love of neighbor can  
take you to our Lord.