

Sheep AND Goats

The parables of Jesus fascinate me. They are, first and foremost, little gems of stories and I do love a good story. Stories have been and are so important in my life, from the stories that were read to me as a child to the ones I began to read for myself to the stories that were my most faithful companions in a primarily solitary childhood. I learned as a preteen that good stories could be incarnated, take on flesh in that ancient societal construct of performance we call theatre and the telling of good stories on stage became my focus through high school, college, seminary and for a rich and blessed twenty-two year career until I became your pastor. I take great delight in ferreting out the deep meaning of Jesus' stories as well as the ones told about him and about the other great men and women of Israel's salvation history.

The parables of Jesus also frustrate me. They are so intricately woven that I am sure I am missing something. They are stories translated from another language, stories that have already been passed around and had their sharpness blurred in the retelling, stories that come from another time, another place, another culture. The best stories always have layers of meaning and I feel I can't possibly get to all of what Jesus was telling his friends, a group to which we, although separated by all those factors, truly belong.

I am not, of course, the first preacher to feel this way. Even those giants of the Church we refer to as "Church Fathers," pastors and bishops and scholars writing on the Scriptures just a few hundred years after Jesus, grappled with how much remained hidden to them. I've been reading a book I mentioned here a couple of weeks ago titled Reading the Bible with the Dead. It turns out that the author is on the Church History faculty at Fuller Seminary and his introduction credits the assistance of his colleagues including our very own Charlie Scalise. The idea of the book is that we miss a lot if we fail to take into consideration the Biblical interpretations of those same Church Fathers, the great theologians of the Reformation, and so on. Some of those Church Fathers had pretty imaginative ways of cracking difficult Bible passages in which they thought everything was an analogy for something else. Although I think some of what they propounded can get a little far-fetched, it's been a good reminder to me that good stories do indeed have those multiple layers of meaning. I think this is especially true in the parables. Jesus was, after all, a rabbi and rabbis have always been and still are masters of the fanciful yarn which gently moves us toward great spiritual truth. Rabbis are likewise famous for using quite outrageous language to indicate a very subtle truth. All of this, I think, is important to consider when reading Jesus' parables.

The difficulty of this week's parable is compounded by the practice of the majority of churches in the Western Hemisphere which have grown up around it. Roman Catholics, joined by the churches of the Anglican Communion, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and other Lutheran bodies, the United Methodist Church and other Methodist bodies, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the United Church of Christ, and the Moravian Church, have declared this last Sunday prior to Advent as "Christ the King" Sunday or "Reign of Christ" Sunday and our parable this morning is one of three Gospel passages associated with this Sunday in the three-year cycle of the Revised Common Lectionary. So all over the world, in those places that look to Western churches for leadership rather than to the Eastern Orthodox community, the majestic nature of Christ is being emphasized. Jesus undoubtedly associates himself, the Son of Man, with the king in this parable. But what does that mean? Is this simply a tale of what is to come, God's kingdom coming? Or is there a right here, right now component to this story? And what,

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exactly, is the Son of Man king over? Is this a tale of the judging of the nations? Or is it something else?

To begin to unwind the possible answers, let's return to the context of this story in the Gospel according to Matthew. To recap: this parable like the two that precede it comes in the last days before Jesus was crucified. He has ridden into Jerusalem in triumph. He has committed a dramatic act of civil disobedience in driving the money changers and sacrifice merchants out of the Temple. He has wrangled with his political and religious opponents. As he left the Temple, his disciples commented on its beauty, causing Jesus to remark on its fragility and the likelihood that it will be destroyed. The disciples cannot imagine such a thing coming to pass until the very end of the age, when "the Day of the Lord" will see the enemies of Israel put to flight and destruction and the faithful remnant of Israel blessed with peace and prosperity. It is to this mistaken assumption that Jesus responds, telling them, essentially, that they are focusing on the wrong things, that no one will know the end until it arrives, and that the important thing is to live in anticipation of the coming age.

This is, as I hope I've communicated successfully, the underlying meaning of the four parables Jesus then tells his disciples. We are called not to concern ourselves with the hidden plans of God but rather on God's clear calling to us. Our focus is to be right here, right now. As our liturgical sisters and brothers say, "Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ is coming again," but we live in the meantime, "in between-time" and "ain't we got fun?" Remember Jesus' words to his disciples at the conclusion of the parable of the wise and foolish virgins? "Keep awake, therefore..." Some of us are going to be far-sighted and some are not but we are all to keep awake and do what we can to help each other, whether that is simply providing a good example or whether it's helping each other find the spiritual oil we need to keep our lamps "burnin', burnin', burnin'."

We are to keep awake and use what God has given us for God's purposes. The greatest gift of all is God's love, given to us freely and with the purpose that we share that love. If we follow the chronology of Matthew, it is only hours before Jesus tells the parable of the talents that he has responded to the question of a lawyer among the Pharisees: "'Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?' He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.'" It is because the love of God is God's greatest gift to us that God's greatest commandment to us is to love God in return and then to share God's love by loving our neighbor. Not all of us will have the capacity, right away, to receive and transfer 5 measures of God's love. But we are not to bury what we have, even if it is only a little. We are to get it in circulation. We are to keep awake for opportunities to love.

That is what comes before our famous parable of the sheep and the goats. Don't worry about what's coming. Keep awake and live in the now. Love those around you and share God's love with them. And what about what comes after this parable? Does that help us put it firmly in its context? I believe it does. The first two verses of chapter 26, immediately after the parable, are this: "When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, "You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.'"

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Jesus goes from telling this story of the triumphant return of the king in glory to what his disciples will surely consider the absolute low point of his story: his brutal torture and death at the hands of the powers that be. Why on earth would he do such a thing?

In part, I think he does it to subvert the easy conclusions that his disciples have come to about the stories he's just told. That goes for us, too, by the way. I've told you about the colleagues I meet with every Wednesday to discuss the upcoming lectionary passages. We've wrestled and wrestled with these stories because we can't quite believe the surface lesson, that our Loving Creator is ready to punish those who don't get it right. There's me, the Baptist preacher, an Episcopal priest, a Methodist minister, and a Quaker chaplain. I still think it sounds like a great set-up for a joke: "A Baptist preacher, an Episcopal priest, a Methodist minister, and a Quaker chaplain walk into a coffee shop..." But that's not the joke here. Jesus' final word before the scene shifts to the chief priests and the elders is like a bizarro-world punchline: "You think these who didn't measure up are the ones who will suffer but it's me... I'm the one upon whom the hammer is about to fall."

Look, most of you know by now that I'm still struggling to understand what theologians have called the economy of the atonement; that is, what actually happened in the life of God when Jesus was executed. I know it was on our behalf, for our good, but how and why I cannot tell. But I am convinced that the death of Jesus was a conspiracy of love; that God set up Godself for pain and death in order to prove to uncomprehending humankind that God loves us beyond our ability to imagine. I cannot reconcile the God whom Jesus said was so loving that we could call God the name a baby calls its father with a God who would consign to eternal punishment those dopey girls without enough oil, or the lazy, alibi-making slave, or even the goats who didn't recognize God's face in their neighbors. I think the context of these parables shows us Jesus at his rabbinic best, whipping up silly stories with outlandish endings of extreme punishment only to wink at the end and say, "But then I took the bullet for them."

So what do I think we can take from this famous story, one that I've certainly cited on countless occasions. Well, for one thing, I think we can hear some reassurance in it. In an article in the most recent edition of "The Christian Century," M. Craig Barnes, the president of Princeton Theological Seminary, told a story of preaching in chapel at that esteemed institution and almost always having as part of his congregation two guide dogs belonging to students who would dutifully lead their masters into the service and lie down under the first pew. "Interestingly," Barnes writes, "they always face the pulpit." Barnes goes on to say that the dogs always look relieved to have a mid-day break from their duties in a place where there is room for them to stretch out. In those dutiful dogs, Barnes sees a picture of many Christians, looking for a break in worship. He writes: "Maybe something – a hymn, anthem, even the sermon – will feel like God's tender hand touching our drooping heads. Maybe. But the rest of our week has trained us not to expect it. 'I'm working. Don't pet me.'" What Barnes is trying to remind us preachers is that sometimes we all need to hear, vicariously, the voice of our Master saying "Good dog. Good dog!"

I think, Good Shepherd, that you can hear in this parable the voice of our Master: "Good dog!" I'm not suggesting that we and we alone are righteous. But, you know, you've done a pretty good job, keeping this congregation going for almost 54 years, keeping the building looking

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good, giving people a place to learn about God's love and to come together in encouragement and mutual challenge. You've given a long-term home to those who live at Shepherd's Garden and temporary shelter to scores of others in the Interfaith Hospitality Network, the Emergency Cold Weather Shelter, even those who've camped out in the alcove behind the Sanctuary. You've provided meals for many of those as well as for the recipients of our grocery vouchers and the clients of the Lynnwood Food Bank. You've given Christmas gifts to children of parents with AIDS, children with parents who are struggling, and this year, children whose parents are incarcerated. You've given to National Ministries and International Ministries and the Ministers and Missionaries Benefit Board and "One Great Hour of Sharing" and World Vision. I can't think of a call to giving that you have not answered. And you have shared the Water of Life and the Bread of the World as you've brought others here to learn about the Jesus Way. So I say it, on God's behalf, like the vicar you would call me in another tradition, "Well done, good and faithful servants."

That's not to say that there is not a challenge in this story for us. There are always more people coming into our orbit who are hungry or thirsty, at the very least for a word about a better way to live. And we need to respond. The problem of course, even for us good sheep, is that there's always something a little goat-y lurking in our lives. At one level, this story is for all of us because we are all BOTH sheep AND goats. As humans, we don't separate out very well. Some days we are really good at being sheep. Some days, we're pretty goatish. When we stand before the throne, then I think the king will finally eradicate those selfish, goat-y instincts from us and we will be pure of heart at last. But until then, we must cooperate with the king's spirit in our lives, the Holy Spirit who stands in for Jesus in this life, to slowly weed out the parts of our life that are selfish, that are spiritually asleep, that have little horns like a goat to push others out of our way.

We enter today into a season of thanksgiving. We do, indeed, have much to be grateful for. Not just the physical things of which we are often reminded at this time of year but for spiritual blessings as well. Our God who has blessed us on our way and still is ours today. The Holy One, the Source of Wonder, whose mercy is forever sure. Our topsy-turvy God who makes the poor rich, the weak strong, and the foolish ones wise. As we give thanks this week, let us be sure to stay awake to those who've not yet felt the blessing, spiritual or otherwise. Let us look for ways to serve our king, the King of Love, who lost everything in order that we should gain. Let us go out on Jesus' behalf, loving, feeding, clothing, waking up our neighbors. Let us be sure to go where he is, so that through us, he may touch others, healing and feeding as he once did in Galilee, and showing those around us the way to life. Amen.