

The Sheep and the Goats



Matthew 25:37 "Then the righteous will answer (the king), 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison, and visited you?' 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.'"

In the Middle East during the day, sheep and goats traditionally graze together, and they are indistinguishable from one another on the hillsides of the Holy Land. But at dusk, the good shepherd separates the goats from the sheep -

-- in order really to protect the goats, who must be kept together in a smaller pen to keep warm. Jesus takes the familiar sight of a shepherd separating the sheep from the goats at the end of the day and turns it into a startling parable about who will inherit the Kingdom of God. Because I think the underlying message of this story is so remarkable, it has become over the years my very favorite parable of Jesus.

What fascinates me most about this parable is how those who are later blessed by our Father in Heaven, apparently do the ministry of God without even knowing it! They inherit the Kingdom of Heaven long prepared for them from the foundation of the world, not because of anything they believed, or anything they thought, or said, or even consciously did, but because they unknowingly cared for Jesus in caring for God's people. And likewise the accursed are sent away to eternal damnation, not because of anything they consciously did or did not do, and not because of any theological doctrines or formulas they believed or didn't believe, but simply because they did not care for God's people. Thus ultimately, this Gospel is about what we are really doing with our lives --- that's what matters ultimately, not what we think or believe or declare to be true! --- So what are we doing with the manifold blessings

and talents that God has bestowed upon each of us, are we burying them in the ground like the wicked servant in last week's story? Are we hoarding our oil like the so-called wise bridesmaids two weeks ago and not sharing with those in need? The fundamental question about our place in the Kingdom of Heaven is how we treat one another; that is what our faith is really all about.

But faith, I believe, is far too often mistranslated by us into some set of accepted principles, or articles of belief, a creed, a theological formula, or a correct Biblical understanding. Faith too often means for us what we think, or what we say, not what we do, not how we treat one another. And oh how we love to argue about doctrines and dogmas and the correct Scriptural interpretation on this controversial issue or that, whether it is abortion, or homosexuality, or the historical Jesus or the last Rector here. Our religion has become so much more an activity of our mind than of our heart. This is, I fear, a terrible corruption of the true meaning of faith and the real nature of our religious life.

The Latin word "credo," from which we derive the English word "creed," is also the root of the English word, 'cardiac,' and more properly refers **not** to the motions of our thoughts and minds, but to the movements of our hearts

and emotions. The word "faith" is really more of a verb than a noun, and should not be translated as we so often do into some static word like "belief," as in 'belief in God.' Faith implies not so much a set of articles of devotion or some accepted creed so much as an attitude, involving more not what we think, but what we feel and what we do and how we treat one another. Faith should be more properly translated into an active verb, like "trust," as in the phrase 'trust in God', or 'love,' as in the phrase 'love our neighbor.' Faith is, as the author of Hebrews reminds us, more about assurance and conviction, than right thinking. Faith is more about our actions than our thoughts, as the Epistle of St. James boldly declares. Believing in God is more an activity of the heart than of the mind, as this morning's parable so clearly reveals. And as a result, true faith is therefore sometimes more accessible to the gentle and lowly in heart than to the clever and intelligent and sophisticated. Our faith in God is less a matter of understanding, and more simply a matter of trust; trust in God, a deep-seated and simple confidence in God's love, **and** our responding action, acting upon that trust by caring for God by caring for those around us, especially the poor and outcast, especially our neighbors, and our enemies. And perhaps for this reason, faith often appears to have been hidden from the wise and

the knowing as St. Paul notes, and is seen instead in the compassionate and humble of heart. Faith is often more clearly found in the peasant farmer than with the university scholar. Because in the end, it is not about what we think or what we say we believe, but about what we do, about how we treat one another!

Interestingly, it is often hard to prove and argue many of our precious doctrines of the faith with any appeal to Jesus' words or actions; it is to other places in Scripture that those who want to prove such dogmas must turn, like to the epistles of St. Paul or Moses' books of Law. So ultimately, what really unites us as followers of Jesus is, I think, not a common acceptance of some creed or doctrine, for in fact Christians rarely agree upon such things. What unites us as Christians, I think, are our actions --- Jesus summarized the law and the prophets for us with the straightforward command to love God, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. And Jesus said that others would know we are his disciples by our love.

In the last analysis, Jesus' message contrasts sharply with both the Pharisees of his day and so many of the religious leaders of our own day. For Jesus was not a theologian, but a storyteller. He was a poet, not a philosopher. He expounded upon the meaning of faith, not

with the use of dogma or doctrine, not with intellectual concepts and abstractions, not even with the Jewish Law. He did not teach like the scribes and Pharisees did, but he still taught with authority, and he expounded upon the most important religious concerns for humanity by telling parables. He used stories, not ideas, to teach us about our faith and the ways of God.

And Jesus' stories are usually not very sophisticated or convoluted. They were rarely urbane or complicated. Jesus expounded upon the fundamental questions of life and faith with simple and everyday illustrations and examples, with references to yokes for oxen, leaven in the bread, salt that has lost its flavor, seeds for sowing, lilies in the field, servants waiting for their master's return, and a shepherd separating his sheep from his goats at the end of the day. Jesus uses these everyday experiences of common life to remind us that we are cherished and beloved by God, and that we need to be responsive to God's love by caring for one another. Some, he observes in this morning's parable, do, and some do not. And *that* is what matters as far as the Kingdom of Heaven is concerned. Not what we think or say about beliefs in God. Not whether we have accepted Jesus Christ as our personal Lord and Savior, but whether we have loved one another as Christ loved us.

Yet it seems to me that we are sometimes so much more interested in the lofty ideas of religion, and a proper and correct understanding of them, than in having a simple and abiding faith. Our heroes of Christianity are so often profound religious thinkers, great articulators of the theology like St. Augustine, or Thomas Aquinas or Martin Luther. Our desire to comprehend and declare our faith in bold creeds and well-chiseled formulas is sometimes greater than our desire to be in a personal relationship with God and to love one another. We are, I am afraid, often more interested in orthodoxy, than in holiness; we are more interested in believing the 'right' things than doing the 'right' things.

And so today I encourage us all to reflect upon our relationship with God by looking at our own personal commitment to this parish in the year ahead, especially in the season of stewardship and widespread pandemic. So the question before us is, are we engaged in 'faithful' service here at St. John's? Are we being transformed by the grace of God in our own lives? And are we changing or bettering the lives of those around us? Are we committed to caring for the poor, the hungry, the unemployed, the sick and imprisoned, or not? As I have stated before, and will probably state again, I believe the role of the Christian Church is vital

in healing the political divides in this nation and in caring for the sick and suffering, the poor and needy in this age of pandemic. I urge you, therefore, to support the work of this congregation for the year ahead and to engage in that work yourself, that this is one of the greatest opportunities for us to express our faith at this time, not in words, or in thoughts, but in something more important, in our actions, actions which will bear witness to our trust in God, to our faith that our God is a God of abundance, not scarcity, that's there's plenty to go around, so we can be generous in our giving and caring of others, with confidence in God's love and care for us, and in our recognition and thanksgiving for God's many blessings upon us, sharing our time and talents with others, and not burying them in the ground or hoarding our oil. So in the end, the question is quite simply, not what we believe, but what will we do? Won't you join those of us who are actively supporting the work and ministry and mission of this congregation, especially at this time of pandemic, this time of fear and division, of wealth inequity, and systemic racial injustice in our land? Or not? AMEN