

I'M GLAD GOD'S IN CHARGE

Matthew 25:31-46

November 20, 2011

Whatever one says or thinks about this passage, there is no denying it is disturbing. Most commentators and biblical scholars will acknowledge that reality. It's about judgment which is enough in itself to make us squirm, but it also calls into question a central claim of one Christian faith: salvation by grace. Is God some cosmic scorekeeper, keeping a database where God tallies up our good deeds and puts them up against our scorecard of bad deeds (commission or omission) and then consigns us to one of two categories: sheep or goat? And the consequences of being one or the other are dire . . . even eternal.

Or, is God so gracious, forgiving and accepting, offering unconditional love that permits us to act in ways far removed from Jesus' example or style because there are no consequences.

First, beware of reducing life to one of two alternatives. Some people like to compel you to choose between two choices, both of which they define. You have to do this or that! Period. There may in fact be other alternatives, ways of understanding than have been offered.

So let's suspend judgment for a bit, God's and our own (since we rarely have all the truth) until we have listened again to the story and opened ourselves to the Spirit's guidance.

Matthew 25:31-46

"If you had to be an animal during Bible times, don't choose to be a goat. For one reason,

there is that whole scapegoat thing."¹ The Old Testament priest would symbolically place the sins of the people on the goat and drive it out into the wilderness where the prospects of survival were nil. Even today calling someone who takes the fall a goat is common; the one who blew the game or lost the deal . . . is a goat.

I suppose being a sheep has its downside – sacrifices, fleecing, mutton stew, but goats clearly are not viewed as sympathetically as sheep.

It's not difficult to tell the difference between a sheep and a goat for a shepherd. Both species are pastured together and can be similarly colored. But, goats eat most anything; sheep graze on grass. Goats are curious and independent by nature, while sheep prefer to stay put with the flock. Goats have hair, sheep fleece. A goat's tail stands up, but a sheep's hangs down. The shepherd knows which is which, but curiously the sheep and goats have no idea which they are until . . . the day.

The story, told for the benefit of early Christians, as well as our own day, is instructive and diagnostic. In other words it's there so we'll have some idea of what the behavior of a sheep vs. a goat is. Of course, Jesus is the shepherd and is the only one who knows who are sheep and who are goats. (I once served a church where the previous pastor told the congregation he knew who in that church were sheep and goats. The uproar led to his dismissal and he left with those who were the sheep to form a new church). In the passage, even the sheep and goats didn't know and both groups are incredulous when it was announced. The crux, the dividing point was who served the "least of these" and thereby served the Christ . . . the

Christ incognito/disguised as a poor man, the stranger, the prisoner.

And they will say, "So that was You" that we served

. . . or ignored. If we'd known, says one group, we'd have certainly dug deep, hopped to it . . . gotten ourselves down to 33rd Street, rolled out the red carpet. But we didn't see you . . . not in those people. We would have been exemplary in our service and conduct. Do you suppose their motive was reward, acclaim? Goats.

On the other hand, the group didn't "see" Jesus in the poor, the prisoner, the downtrodden, but they ministered . . . simple acts of compassion. They simply saw a need and filled. Will Willimon notes the criteria by which the King shall judge aren't overwhelming. They are basic human needs, not dramatic, cosmic problems . . . small acts of service. He recalls a Bible study he led as a college chaplain. He had just read the passage to the gathered group when a sophomore blurted out, "I can do that." What? "I can do that . . . I thought to please Jesus you had to be a missionary to Africa or a martyr . . . but a cup of cold water? No problem. I can't preach a sermon or build a church, but I can give a hand to a needy person." Not great and noble deeds of faith; simple acts of compassion. I can do that.² No calculating motives; no agenda to impress offers with their piety or get the big pay-off. It was unself conscious. Sheep.

Earlier I said this passage is diagnostic, that it gives us a picture of a fully functional, healthy Christian. And one who is not. Lindsay Armstrong picks up on that image. "Each year I

visit the doctor for no obvious reason. I make the appointment, pay the parking, sit in the waiting room and then have a complete physical exam. It's to measure my wellness and possibly identify problems I may not have been aware of. It takes some doing, some prodding to get me there. Like most, if I'm feeling O.K., why go? It's not an entirely comfortable experience. Needles, labs, prodding and poking. Sometimes I suppose its just plain denial. But the insurance company thinks this is such a good idea they pay the bill. My doc thinks it is well worth the investment and inconvenience because it could save my life or preserve the quality. My spouse adds emphasis. (If they stop pushing you and ask if the life insurance is paid up you might wonder). And so, I go."

In many ways, says Armstrong, Matthews depiction in this passage is like a wellness check, the annual physical. Its purpose is not to condemn or scare but to learn, diagnose and take steps to correct and establish new habits. After all, as our doc wants us to flourish, so does our Creator, Lord . . . King.³ Particularly in this passage, the health of your heart and eyesight. When our hearts grow cold and we can't see what's really there, we need to know it . . . or live in denial and ignorance; spiritual disease with goat like symptoms.

Admittedly, this passage states the case in pretty drastic terms. But, it seems to take that to get our attention. The doc says, "If you don't lose 50 lbs., stop smoking, get moving and take your meds on schedule, you're gonna be leaving us early." We generally don't appreciate being confronted by another so directly . . . but it's your life we're talking about here.

¹ Homiletics, Vo. 23, p 30

² PR, p 34

³ Feasting on the Word, Yr A, Vol 4, p 333

And God wants you around . . . forever. Sometimes I think we'd prefer God to mind his own business and stay out of ours. We like God, but in his place like heaven or stained glass windows or moralizing stories. But that's not the God we meet in the Bible. God is not a remote supreme being on a throne up there above the clouds or out there in the mysterious reaches of the universe.⁴ Jesus showed that by his entry into this life, the messiness and ambiguity of life. God is here, but not just in church or the expected, well ordered times. God is here in face of your neighbor, the one who needs you

. . . God draws near in disguise in the least of these, the vulnerable, the weak, children.

Permit me to state the obvious. God draws near because he wants to save our souls, to use the language of the old revival meetings. God wants to give us the gift of life – true, deep, authentic life. God wants to save us by opening our eyes and freeing us to care for other human beings; to actually forget ourselves right into the fullness of life.

There's the instructive and diagnostic nature of this passage on judgment. But a caveat that must be noted. We may see it as only a call to do humanitarian work on behalf of the underprivileged. Thus salvation is understood as something we achieve. Is it a denial of salvation by grace? I say NO. Grace is given; it is something we discover; something we could never earn but is revealed in an "unlikely" place – among the least of these. There is a warning but like a parent who would protect a child from harm. And there is the discovery that love that is natural, overflowing,

uncalculated – the Jesus brand – is salvation. Now is the time.

Let me close with a simple children's sermon.

There's an old story – probably invented by some preacher – but it illustrates the spirit of this passage pretty well. It's about a boy living in a children's home. For grace at the dinner table, the superintendent usually prayed, "Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest, let this food to us be blessed." After this happened several times, the boy said to him, "You always ask Jesus to come, but he never does. Will he ever come?"

The superintendent said, "If we really want him to, he will."

The boy thought, "I really want him to, so I'm going to put a chair beside me tonight so he'll have a place to sit when he comes."

That evening, during supper, there was a knock on the door, and standing there was an old man, poorly clothed, cold and hungry. The superintendent invited him to join them for supper, and he pointed to the empty chair. The man sat and, the boy gladly passed food to him and even shared from his own plate.

Later the boy said, "Jesus must not have been able to come himself, so he sent this man in his place."

Exactly. Our good deeds are not by themselves a means of salvation, but they are significant of a healthy relationship with Jesus.⁵
Amen.



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⁴ ibid, p 334

⁵ Homiletics, Vol 23, p 32