“What About The Goats?”

Matthew 25:31-46

November 26, 2017

Brother (or sister) can you help me out? How often have you all heard something like that? It often happens while walking downtown somewhere. One of the first times I remember being asked for help in this situation was in Wrigleyville in Chicago. We had just eaten somewhere and we had a to go box to bring back with us to the hotel. There was a homeless veteran looking for some money. I didn’t have any cash so I gave him the to go box. Then we went on our way. You can hardly go anywhere in a city without being asked for money. Eventually it leaves us pretty callused. Those panhandlers. Go get a job. Are they going to use the money I give them for boos or drugs? Is that any of our business?

As church people, we struggle with these sorts of issues all the time. I bet 2/3rds of the phone calls that we receive here are about when is the food pantry open or help with paying utilities. People out there are struggling. People are struggling everywhere. Just last Sunday we had a gentleman come in and sit towards the back corner. I saw him, he wasn’t singing along with the hymns or speaking the liturgy. He was just standing and sitting with all of us. So after worship I go up and introduce myself to him. He said he would like to speak to me. He tells me that he had arrived on Tuesday and that he had not had much to eat or anywhere to stay. His name is Tom, he says and he is looking for his stepsiblings. Tom didn’t have a phone, so I tried looking up his stepsiblings online. Unfortunately, they had rather common names, think John Johnson. Found one in Logan, but the number was disconnected. He said he had been to Under the Bridge, but there are no beds available. He also needed clothes and food. We got him some food and that seemed about all we could do. When a similar situation was encountered on a Sunday in Greensboro, we could send him to Urban Ministry. They were open on Sunday, they could get him some food, clothes and help him find some housing. It was almost like a crutch, we could say go to Urban Ministry and then we could move on with our lives. But last Sunday, there was nowhere for me to send him. I was on the list of places he went looking for help. I felt like I failed. Then all of the excuses or perhaps reasons that I couldn’t entered my mind. We can’t give out money. We don’t have that or can’t do that. It all felt like a bunch of hot air. I know there are reasons that we can’t give out money or other services but it still doesn’t feel good to say it. I also knew that I would be preaching on this passage today. I sure felt like a goat.

So here we are. Our tour of Matthew is ending. I am glad it is over. This is my nineteenth sermon here already. That is pretty crazy to think about. I have preached more in 4 months here than probably in the previous 3 years. So now I have a little bit of a routine and hope that I am going in the right direction. Maybe some of you will tell me and others won’t. There have just been so many strange parables and passages that we have worked through in Matthew. So much judgement. So much accountability. So many demands for righteousness. After a while it just seems a bit utopian. No way that anybody could follow any of these rules or instructions. But God’s demands on our lives are not easy. Sure, the yoke is easy and the burden is light, but we aren’t just supposed to sit around doing nothing, assured of our salvation. With all of the railing on judgement and accountability lately I want to you know this: we were working to arrive to this point. We were fighting for our belief and commitment in the reign of Christ. Will we be a people who will show that the beatitudes are a way of life or will we sit idly by and use old theology as crutch? Maybe you are all ready for this series of sermons to end. Let’s get to advent already. I want to hear some Christmasy stuff. Give me some Joy to the World. It is coming, don’t worry. However, there is no better text to end our tour of Matthew on.

When the Son of Man (which we generally assume to be Jesus) comes in his glory, and all angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people from one another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at his left. The whole passage can hinge on how you translate this little phrase. Pante ta ethne. In the NRSV it is translated as all the nations. That is what it means literally. Several times throughout Matthew it clearly refers to the Gentiles, the non-Jews. If panta ta ethne refers to the gentiles then the least of these refers to Jesus’ followers. Then this story would tell how the gentiles were judged based on their treatment of Jesus’ followers. If we are going to say that panta ta ethne refers to everyone then the passage is much more universal. The least of these then simply refers to the thirsty, the stranger, the sick and the prisoner. Both translations of Panta ta ethne are good, but the second truly exhibits the universal idea that Jesus was going for.

If this is everyone, it plays out in a very interesting scene. Everyone is all gathered, it seems like a scene out of a playground game. There are people of all different colors and nationalities waiting to be picked. There is a captain choosing two different teams. Except they won’t be even teams. This is not based on athletic ability, popularity, strategy or correct theology. It is based on simple kindness. Everybody wants to be on the sheep team. Why, I kind of like goats. Why are sheep good and goats bad? Pretty easy to tell a sheep from a goat. Sheep are fluffy and goats aren’t. Throughout history and today in parts of Africa and Asia, sheep and goats were nearly identical. Only a shepherd can tell the difference between the two. So what is it that the shepherd sees?

Sheep are not necessarily very sweet and docile. They are pretty stupid, but they find ways to break out of fences. They are still dependent on their herders. Goats are independent, stubborn, destructive. Shepherds protect their sheep from the environment while goat herders protect their environment from the goats. A sheep is led by his shepherd and a goatherd is led by his goat. Sheep like to graze low-lying grasses, while goats browse, taking down whatever they want in their paths. Maybe some of you have seen on 60 minutes a few weeks ago about this new goat business that is popping up. They use goats to eat vegetation in areas that will be vulnerable to wildfire. This has been shown to help prevent or at least slow down massive wildfires. How about that? Just let those goats loose.

Once the teams are picked, there is no turning back. Those on team sheep get a nice little pep talk. Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 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, 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. The sheep ask, “When did we see you?”

The goats get the opposite of a pep talk. “You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison you did not visit me.” The goats ask, “When did we see you?”

Both groups had the same answer. The last group thought they should have been looking for the face of Jesus the whole time. Somehow, they missed it. They think their mistake was bad perception. The sheep didn’t think that they were supposed to be looking for Jesus. That reminded me of Forrest Gump. Lt. Dan and Forrest were in a hotel in New York after Forrest had gone on a late night show. Lt. Dan telling Forrest about his meeting with a priest. “The priest asked me if I had found Jesus yet?, Forrest have you found Jesus?” “I didn’t know I was supposed to be looking for him,” Forrest replies. That might be the reply of the sheep. They might find the idea that looking for the face of Jesus would be a waste of time. They were feeding people because they were hungry. They clothed people because they were naked. They visited people because they were sick.

The goats had a different idea. Whenever they fed the hungry, they did only to those who were deserving, maybe those who were working and didn’t test positive for drugs. They clothed people that met certain standards. They visited those in prison because they were falsely accused. The goats were stubborn. Independent. Looking for accolades for the good they did. A plaque for all they did. Maybe a building named after them.

The one thing that has not been mentioned yet is that the goats are condemned to eternal punishment. Haven’t we been taught by other scriptures, namely the letters of Paul that there is nothing we can do to merit salvation. It is all by the grace of God. We are not supposed to be able to earn it. Well this passage sure reeks of works righteousness. You must do all of these things to inherit eternal life. This is the tension of this passage. That is why we read the whole bible and look at the bigger picture. If you would read just Romans, you would think there would be no response required for the gift of faith. But with this passage and elsewhere we realize that faith without works is dead.

More than anything this passage is a wakeup call. To change our attitudes. Help our neighbors, love our neighbors. Just do it. There is no mention of faithful church attendance, serving on committees, or anything like that. I sure wish there was. Look out for the least of these, which includes Christ.

When I look at passages about helping the needy it always gives me a pause. Week after week when looking for material for worship like the prayer of confession I will see prayers about looking out for our neighbor and helping those with little. It makes me wonder, what if the people in the pews were the ones with little. What would it feel like to hear that? That our mission is to care for the underprivileged. I have no idea what it would be like to live hand to mouth. To worry where our next meal is coming from. To be sick in a hospital with no family around. Each week we have people coming through our building getting food. They come in and I might have a quick conversation with them about something. But I don’t know what their lives are like. It might be the ridiculous struggle that I think it may be. Or they just need a little help with some food. Either way, we are okay with that. But as Presbyterians we have to recon with that. The people that we serve will probably not be the people next to us in the pews. Which is too bad. I think we are losing a great perspective there. Not to miss having a greater diversity in our church. Perhaps this passage can call us to think about the economic divisions between the people around us. I’m not sure what that would look like in this church but it can get us thinking. What would it look like to do more than feed the hungry? To get to know them? Not just so we can say that we do, but to pursue greater healing in this community. I think that may be a sermon for another day. Funny how that works.

This passage is one of the big ones. There are even people out there that call themselves Matthew 25 Christians. One of those passages that a preacher wants to bring the heat on. I hope I did that. Anyway, this passage is a great reminder of the obligation to our neighbor. If Christ is really our King, these are the sort of things we will do. We will take the gift of faith and grace that God has given us and turn it into service. For the sake of God and not for ourselves. Our Shepherd knows who we are. Let’s act like it. Amen.

**Matthew 25:31-46**

**The Judgement of the Nations**

31 ‘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. 32All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, 33and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. 34Then 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; 35for 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, 36I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” 37Then 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? 38And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” 40And 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.” 41Then he will say to those at his left hand, “You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; 42for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.” 44Then they also will answer, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?” 45Then he will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” 46And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.’

Prayer of Adoration

Lord, we are here in this place to meet with you;  
through the Holy Spirit lead us to encounter You today,  
help us to know that You are God.

Within our community and church, we declare with faith that You are God.  
Amid the unresolved fears of our lives, we declare with faith that You are God.  
We bring to You now the worship of our lives.

Come, let us bow down in worship,  
let us kneel before the Lord our Maker;  
for He is our God  
and we are the people of His pasture,  
the flock under His care.

Amen

## Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

## God the True Shepherd

11 For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. 12As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. 13I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. 14I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. 15I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. 16I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

20 Therefore, thus says the Lord God to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. 21Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, 22I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep.

23 I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. 24And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the Lord, have spoken.