

## LET ME INTRODUCE YOU TO GOD

### MATTHEW 25:31-46

“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. 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, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. 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; 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.’

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? 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.’

Then 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; 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 and you did not visit me.’

Then 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?’ Then 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.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Does anyone have a goat, sheep, or donkey you can lend me for a live Nativity scene for Christmas Eve? A mother, father, and baby would be nice as well, but I would imagine they are easier to find than livestock. But people will come to church on Christmas Eve if we tell them we have livestock!

Have you ever noticed in the Bible that goats get scapegoated a lot? The scapegoat was the goat over whose head the high priest Aaron confessed the sins of the people of Israel on the Day of Atonement. Then the goat, symbolically bearing their sins, was driven out into the wilderness, where it probably became dinner for a hungry lion.

Sheep, on the other hand, fair only slightly better. When one out of a hundred gets lost, the ninety-nine are on their own while the shepherd goes out looking for the dumb lost one. He probably then has a party and roasts a goat for all of his friends to celebrate.

One could argue that it was equally dangerous being a sheep in biblical times. Once a lamb was shaved for its wool it might end up on the family dinner table, in a stew, or on sacrificial alter. For those who believe that God needs a blood sacrifice to atone for our sins, Jesus is metaphorically the unblemished sheep who died for our sins. But being a sheep on judgment day was far better than being a goat.

For a shepherd, separating sheep from goats is not difficult. Though both species are often pastured together and can be similarly colored, they are easily distinguished from each other. Goats are thinner than sheep. They have different eating habits (goats browse on leaves, shrubs, twigs and vines, while sheep graze on grass and clover). Goats are curious and independent by nature, while sheep prefer to stay put with the flock. Goats have hair, but sheep have fleece. And a goat's tail stands up while a sheep's hangs down.

Of course, as Jesus goes on with his discourse, it's quickly evident that he's not actually talking about animals. He's using sheep and goats as an analogy for humankind, which is likewise sorted into two groups at the final judgment -- sheep-people on the right and goat-people on the left.

The ones on the right are welcomed into the kingdom of God. The ones on the left are told to depart from Christ's presence forever. The criteria for the sorting, however, have nothing to do with which way one's tail points. Rather, they have to do with whether or not one has been merciful and helpful to those in dire straits. Those on the right, Jesus said, have actually ministered to *him* by their compassion toward those in need, even though they did not recognize they were actually ministering to Jesus. Those on the left have actually ignored *him* by ignoring the needy.

Where do you find yourself in this story? The goat and sheep people all seemed to be surprised by who they were and how God saw them. When the sheep people were told that in doing their good deeds they were doing it for Jesus, they replied "We didn't know that was you." When the goat people were reminded that they failed to do good to the despised and rejected Jesus, they also replied "We didn't know that was you."

Which despised and neglected group do we fail to both see and serve? The homeless or mentally ill? The developmentally challenged? The elderly or young? Those of a different political persuasion or economic standing? The unemployed, uninsured, undocumented worker, the black man, the teenage whose gender we can't figure out? Maybe we don't actively try and keep any of these out of our church, but are we actively trying to bring them in or going out serve them?

There are several things we can hear for ourselves in the judgment story. One is to recognize that our sins of *omission* can be just as serious as our sins of *commission*. The passage reminds us that what we don't do can be as great a reflection of our commitment to follow Jesus -- or lack thereof -- as what we do.

"When did we see you, Lord? Was it during the hours we spent in front of the TV - or out shopping, just for fun? Was it during the time we spent cleaning the house, chasing the Martha Stewart ideal? Or was it those extra hours we put in at work, hoping to curry the boss's favor and get that promotion?"

There's nothing wrong with such pursuits, but if we allow them to crowd out Christian service, we just may be taking our place among the goats.

One thing jumps out at me every time I read the story of the sheep and the goats: They are not separated based on what they believe, or where they worship, or what their status in life may be. They are sorted by their willingness to help the poor, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the imprisoned, and care for the sick.

The goats in the story seem to suggest that if they had known that the poor they encountered but ignored was Jesus, they would have felt differently toward them. When we ignore the poor and the rejected, we ignore Jesus.

This parable is not just about sheep and goats. It is also about the very nature of Jesus. If you want to know who Jesus is, he is not the one sitting on a throne separating the sheep and the goats. Jesus is the hungry woman at the soup kitchen who nobody wants to sit next to because she has no access to a shower. Jesus is the cashier behind the counter fearing he will be deported because he doesn't have the right paperwork. Jesus is the teenager in juvenile detention who everyone has given up on. Jesus is the elderly woman in the nursing home who hasn't seen a visitor in years. Jesus is that cancer patient who struggles every day to get her kids on the bus for school. Jesus is the deranged schizophrenic babbling to himself on the street.

Maybe we don't recognize that it is Jesus because we don't take the time to see them or get to know them. Or maybe we don't see Jesus in them because we just can't believe Jesus could look like that.

But I think the point of the story is not whether we recognize Jesus in unexpected places. I think the point is that we treat everyone, especially the weakest, poorest, hungriest, sickest, like we were treating Jesus himself.