

Team Goat or Team Sheep

Sermon for Christ the King Sunday, November 25, 2023

Readings: Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Psalm 100; Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46

Sermon text: 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.'

Are you on team sheep or team goat?

I don't know about you but I often feel like one of the goats in this parable of Matthew 25.

The goats neglect to do frequent tasks of selfless love. Instead of strangers they visit friends; as a general rule they do not invite homeless people to live with them, even if they engage with them on the street, or visit prisoners unless they are relatives. That's me, on my own.

But of course I do visit the sick, supervise housing for the elderly poor, support feeding programs and help provide services that will help recent immigrants move from poverty and dependence to wellbeing and freedom. It's part of my job as rector of Grace. So I should say it is the church of which I am a part that does the work of finding and serving Christ in our neighbors.

Being an involved member of the church is basically signing up for team sheep. Indeed it is part of the reason to join an active church, for being a member is to fulfill this Christian duty spelled out in Matthew's dramatic parable. So thank God that at the last day I can at least point to what we do here at Grace as following Christ's commandment—serving God when we help the most in need.

And I try do so not only out of duty, or for fear of God, but for love of God, for joy in giving. Which brings me to gratitude—an appropriate theme to explore on the Thanksgiving weekend.

Gratitude

You can't give what you don't have. So consider what you do have—and give thanks—then go on to share it, share the joy, share the abundance. share the grace of God through a spirit of gratitude.

In doing so you will be helping yourself, for you will become a happier person. So argues Arthur C. Brooks in a recent article in The Atlantic entitled "[Four Ways to be Grateful—and Happier](#)". Brooks cites some of the scientific research behind his claims. He writes that "the psychologist Robert Emmons, the top academic expert in the field, defines gratitude as a combination of recognizing goodness outside ourselves

—in people, in nature, in the divine—and affirming it to ourselves and others. To be ungrateful, therefore, is to fail to see goodness, or to see it and fail to affirm it.”

To see and fail to see—whether Christ in the poor or goodness in ourselves and others—is a key to a flourishing life and an eternal reward.

Brooks goes on to say, “The trick is to develop ways to be a more grateful person—that is, to recognize goodness and affirm it in a systematic way.” That is, you can develop the muscles and senses for gratitude with practice—bolstered as he goes on to detail by regular exercise.

We need the practice because we often don’t feel gratitude for what life deals us. We have what social scientists call a built-in negativity bias, “an evolved tendency to focus more on adverse events than on positive ones.” To overcome this we have to “adopt purposive gratitude routines.”

He goes on to write about four such routines that he credits to ancient philosophers like Marcus Aurelius and Cicero: 1. Make thankfulness an interior discipline. Start the day with an expression of gratitude such as “I will rejoice in the day that the Lord has made.” 2. Express gratitude in tangible actions: make a gratitude list, reach out with a couple of appreciative notes or calls each day (three when you don’t feel like it). 3. Make it a sacred moral duty—so Jean-Jacques Rousseau and George Washington say. 4. Express your sense of gratitude and praise in worship and prayer. He cites the 13th-century German Christian mystic Meister Eckhart who wrote: “If a man had no more to do with God than to be thankful, that would suffice.” In other words, if you want to pray but don’t know what to say, just bow your head and say, “Thank you.”

And do you know what prompts those prayers of thanksgiving very well?—visits from others when you’re feeling low, or sick—or even in prison. When you receive a helping hand from a stranger, or an answer to your prayer from the Spirit. So we increase the circle of gratitude by helping others.

Kinship and Creation

Finally, I want to bring out a third angle of understanding our Christian duty to serve the least of these members of the family by asking who is included in the family. No doubt, the Evangelist intends to mean those who follow Jesus as Lord, whereas as those who reject him are not members of the family. And so he is really dividing the members of the church into sheep and goats based on their treatment of the poor who are identified with Christ. This was quite revolutionary, for on Matthew’s account people who are not Christians may be judged worthy of eternal life for their compassionate treatment of others—as many people of good faith and will do whatever their religious beliefs.

And let’s widen the circle even further and see the members of God’s family as not only all human but all life, indeed all created being. How do we treat our mother earth, our

brother and sister animals, as St Francis calls them, even our sister death? Can we see all of these as kin?

And if we can see all living beings, and the earth as a living being in its own right, as kin, does that make a difference?

I think it does. Martin Buber, the great Jewish philosopher of the mid-twentieth century wrote a famous book, *I and Thou*, in which he argued that the distinction between an I and It relation and an I and Thou relation makes all the difference. To see God, god's creatures, and the earth we walk on and depend on for all of our needs as persons, thous. In a way, we must then ask permission to dig the earth, to mine for minerals and oil. We should give thanks to the animals who sacrifice their lives for our meals—as indigenous hunters do. To never kill or extract for no good reason; it is a sin to waste, to exploit, to abuse. No, rather to serve and be served in a mutual cycle of stewardship.

The upcoming climate talks—COP 28—will be a test of some of the walk and talk around this existential issue of the future of earth and humanity.

If the Son or Logos of creation is eternally present in creation as the incarnate logos or pattern and purpose of things, then we encounter Christ also in the faces of animals, in the abundance of species, in the soft and the bitter winds, the sun and the rain of life on earth. We may then well be reminded in the day of judgment, and perhaps in the voice of our great grandchildren—when did we help or harm them? Then which will it be, Team Sheep or Team Goat?

In light of these reflections, reread Psalm 100, noting the praise of “all the lands,” our inclusion as God’s people and “the sheep of his pasture,” and a call to praise and give thanks to God for all of our blessings.

- 1 Be joyful in the Lord, all you lands; *
 serve the Lord with gladness
 and come before his presence with a song.
- 2 Know this: The Lord himself is God; *
 he himself has made us, and we are his;
 we are his people and the sheep of his pasture.
- 3 Enter his gates with thanksgiving;
 go into his courts with praise; *
 give thanks to him and call upon his Name.
- 4 For the Lord is good;
 his mercy is everlasting; *
 and his faithfulness endures from age to age.

Amen.

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