

Matthew 25:31-46 (Goats vs Sheep)

Scholars frequently identify this story not as a parable, but as a “figurative teaching” or an “apocalyptic prediction”, that is, a story that depicts the final judgment and clarifies the criteria by which the judgment will be made.

But, this story is a true parable, a puzzle that includes the kind of twists so typical of Jesus’ parables. Like many of Jesus’ more powerful parables, it is also a trap. We wander into it thinking that we will be able to figure out how to be counted among the sheep, only to discover that the very attempt locates us within the goat herd.

Two aspects of context are important here. First, the parable corresponds to the Beatitudes which we will look at next week, as bookends for Jesus’ teachings in Matthew. Like the Beatitudes, the parable describes the essential values and practices that define those who participate in the coming empire of heaven.

Second, within the more immediate context of Matthew’s eschatological discourse, it is the capstone of Jesus’ long, winding answer to the question his disciples ask as he ends his occupation of the Temple and prophesies its destruction: “What sign will signal your return and the end of the world?”

Jesus answers this in many ways; violent chaos; cosmic portents; “no one knows”. But in this parable we learn that the coming of Son of Man has been present all along among the most vulnerable members of the society. The parable clearly connects the advent of the heavenly king/judge/Son of Man with practices of compassionate care among the “least ones”.

It makes a striking connection with Daniel in the Old Testament which states: “As my vision continued that night, I saw someone like a son of

man coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient One and was led into his presence. He was given authority, honour, and sovereignty over all the nations of the world, so that people of every race and nation and language would obey him. His rule is eternal and his kingdom will never be destroyed.”

Daniel is the source of the image of the “human one” or “Son of Man” coming in glory. The Son of Man comes with universal and everlasting dominion, but does not act like a typical ruler or judge. The Son of Man in this parable overturns the paradigm of power and makes his dwelling place among the least ones, with whom he is one. This is the parable’s first shock.

The second shock comes when we try to determine who the least ones are. The parable explicitly confirms the criteria of compassion - enumerated no fewer than four times! - upon which judgment turns. We know clearly what to do, but to whom should we do it? Who are the least ones? Anyone in need, Christian or not, creating an enormous pool of potential “least ones”. Why didn’t Matthew’s Jesus give his disciples a clearer identification of the “least ones”? Perhaps because doing so would make us all goats.

Jesus speaks first to the sheep, the righteous, affirming that they are blessed by the father and inherit the kingdom that has been prepared for them from the foundation of the world. They have given him food, drink, hospitality, clothing, care and visited him when he was in need.

These blessed ones have demonstrated their faithfulness by performing acts of lovingkindness. The command to care for the poor and the needy is found throughout scripture, but it is especially manifested in Jesus’ ministry as he announces the arrival of God’s kingdom as he cures the sick, welcomes the despised, and provides food for the hungry. He orders his disciples to continue this same ministry. The service of the “least” concerns all people, everywhere.

Jesus warned the disciples repeatedly of their upcoming persecution, suggesting that believers would certainly be among those who are suffering and imprisoned. The primary purpose of a prison at the time was not to incarcerate the individuals for an infinite period of punishment but to have a place for them to await trial. It was the responsibility of loved ones to provide some basic necessities while the person was in jail. Not only are believers to provide this service for one another, but they are to demonstrate Christ's love by ministering to others who may have no one to care for them.

Similar situations exist in many developing nations where those hospitalized depend on family and friends to provide care. This includes bed clothes, meals, and watching over them. I experienced this in Tanzania where I brought diapers and formula to the hospital for a very sick baby daily. In Tanzania, homeless children are often imprisoned and need care in the provision of clothing and meals. They are often provided with this care through the [Olive Branch for Children](#), a charity we have supported since 2005.

The righteous performed these deeds of lovingkindness with no idea that they were ministering to Christ. Jesus says that whenever they gave food to the hungry, welcomed a stranger, clothed the naked, or visited the sick or imprisoned, they acted in kindness toward Jesus himself. Jesus can identify with the least of these because he has walked in their shoes.

On the other hand, those who have failed to see the needs of the disadvantaged have acted as though they have never seen Jesus. They have not followed in Christ's footsteps. They have not continued to do the work that Jesus has called them to do. They have not realized who the real King is.

Jesus' address to the goats runs through the same list of criteria, expressed in the negative. Yet, both the sheep and the goats express

the same surprise in response to the king's address to each of them: "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry"? Although their questions are virtually identical, the questions carry radically different implications. The sheep apparently acted out of genuine compassion without any awareness that Jesus might be present among the least ones and without any thought of potential reward. In the patronage economy of the ancient world, where gifts and debt were one of the primary means of ordering relationships, it was considered foolish to give to those at the bottom of the pyramid, who could not be expected or able to repay the debt or return the gift.

The sheep have been busy ignoring this social code. The goats, however, are still trapped within this code. On their lips, the same question the sheep have asked implies something quite different. For them, "When did we see you hungry....?" implies that had they only known of Jesus' presence among the least ones, they would have been right there pitching.

The quest of modern Christians to identify the least ones as precisely as possible aligns us with the goats. Even the broadest definition of the least ones, as anyone and everyone in need, carries a similar consequence if the ensuing acts of compassion are motivated by the reward promised in the parable. When motivated by a reward system, such deeds cease to be "compassionate" in any way. They turn into the kinds of charity that preserve the vulnerability of the least ones in order to confirm the "righteousness" of the benefactors. In other words, as we pursue our quest to identify the least ones, the jaws of the parable snap shut. We discover ourselves in the goat pen.

In the Beatitudes, Jesus identifies the subjects of the empire of heaven as the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and those who suffer for righteousness' sake. Apparently, Jesus has the same group in mind when he describes the sheep in the parable: those

who find inherent value in identification with, and care for the most vulnerable.

This group does not pursue relationships which so often turn people into objects or concepts. The relationships sheep pursue locate them smack in the middle of the least ones themselves, where Jesus himself is found. For these, the Son of Man is not still coming. He is already here.

Throughout Matthew's Gospel, Jesus' teaching announces and illustrates the kingdom of God. God's kingdom does not function like a typical kingdom. This divine reign has invaded the world and is good news - especially to those on the fringe of society. This rule welcomes those who have no status and seeks to serve others rather than expose or abuse them.

Those who have experienced God's kingdom cannot go back to life as it once was. Stanley Hauerwas writes, "The difference between followers of Jesus and those who do not know Jesus is that - those who have seen Jesus no longer have any excuse to avoid "the least of these".

The blessed ones are those who have seen the King, a king who is not like the kings of this world. They are blessed because they know a king who brings real peace, who sees the needy, and who hears the cries of the oppressed. In God's kingdom, no one is hungry, cold, homeless, sick, or alone. To bear witness to Christ as King is to be a messenger of the Kingdom, to serve others and thereby profess the invasion of God's glorious kingdom.

The bottom line of the sheep and goats parable is this: The way we treat others is the way we treat Jesus. That means sin is not defined as the violation of rules, but as the violation of people. We need to remember that when Jesus was talking about the poor, he was talking about the destitute. The poor in the time of Jesus, were not just short of money, food, water, medical care, or sitting in prison – they had NO food, NO

water, NO medical care, NO ONE to look after their needs.

The “least ones” themselves had nothing to share, nothing to give. They had nothing for themselves. They were destitute, living one day, even one hour at a time. When talking about feeding the hungry, Jesus was not talking about making donations to the food bank. We need to remember that he was not the quiet, serene, fuzzy warm healer and preacher. He was preaching to and attacking the powers that be - the Roman rulers and the Temple elite. He was challenging them to change the social system - to change society. That was the only way that the “least ones” would ever see justice and fairness.

This parable goes beyond individual needs - it's about communities, it's about actually changing the world of the “least ones”, it's about changing society and its values. It's more than simply feeding and caring for the “least ones”, it's about fighting for justice for the “least ones”. That fight still continues in the developing world, as the sheep try to help the “least ones” by fighting to better their lives, while others - the goats - continue to exploit and abuse them for their own benefit and profits.

For example, there has been an ongoing battle with Nestles. A number of years ago, it was over baby formula being pushed on third world mothers, who had no access to clean water or money to keep buying the formula once their milk dried up. The churches initiated a boycott. Today it is about water.

Across the globe, Nestles is pushing to privatize and control public water resources. Their Chairman of the Board, Peter Brabeck, has explained his philosophy with "The one opinion, which I think is extreme, is represented by the NGOs, who bang on about declaring water a public right. That means as a human being you should have a right to water. That's an extreme solution."

Since that quote received widespread attention, Brabeck has

backtracked, but his company has not. Around the world, Nestles is bullying communities - into giving up control of their water. As those who care about the “least ones”, we are challenged to take a stand for public water sources.

Nestles needs to be told that we and all people have a right to water and to stop locking up our resources! At the World Water Forum a few years ago, Nestles successfully lobbied to stop water from being declared a universal right, declaring open hunting season on local water resources by the giant corporations looking to control them. For Nestles, this means billions of dollars in profits. For us, it means paying up to 2,000 times more for drinking water because it comes from a plastic bottle.

As Nestles pumps out fresh water at high volumes, water tables lower and local wells become degraded. In many places safe water becomes a privilege only affordable for the wealthy. Clean water is a resource that should be available to all, including our Indigenous siblings who still do not have clean water in many of their communities. It should be something we look after for the public good, to keep safe for generations, not something we pump out by billions of gallons to fuel short-term private profits. Water needs to be treated as a public right! The idea of water for profit has become almost demonic.

Collecting rainwater has been made illegal in many American states as the government claims ownership. Nestles bottles water straight from the heart of California’s drought. Americans are not the only crazy ones. Nestles has won a permit through 2017 to drain an Ontario aquifer whenever it likes taking about 1.1 million litres of water per day from Hillsburgh for its bottling operations in nearby Aberfoyle, while by-laws on water use for households restrict their access to their own water during dry conditions in the summer. A community’s access to its own water supply is not as important as a company's profits.

This parable stresses the connection between seeing a need and acting

on it. The sequence of seeing, having compassion, and acting is repeatedly demonstrated as Matthew tells us that Jesus himself, when he “saw” the crowds, had compassion on them and healed, fed, and taught them.

Scripture teaches that God sides with “the least”, whether a slave kicked out to the curb by a jealous wife in Genesis, a barren woman desperate for a child in 1 Samuel, an unarmed band of slaves on the run from a super power in Exodus, not to mention eunuchs and foreigners in Isaiah, or widows and orphans in James. There are 300 biblical texts that address matters of social justice and which instruct the faithful on how to think about and to treat the poor, including the Proverb, whose meaning underlies Matthew’s gospel: “Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but those who are kind to the needy honour him.” Social justice is what the messiah is all about.

Matthew’s Jesus is not trying to carve out a welfare exception for his followers on the grounds of faith, as if they were deserving of special treatment because they believed in him. Rather, he is demanding justice in the traditional biblical sense based upon the longstanding and widespread belief in Judaism that economic justice was owed to whomever was on the bottom of the pecking order. This parable combines the paradoxical qualities of the Son of Man. He is the majestic, exalted Judge and King whose identity is hidden in the poor. We will be judged by the extent to which we see, have compassion, and act in response to his sufferings in the world.

Preoccupation with our own salvation is exactly what Jesus is warning us against. When you’re living your life by loving your neighbour, you don’t have time to selfishly worry about YOU! Nor do we have to. The Good News here is that there is no checklist of good deeds to fill out. Jesus is talking about a way of living, one that isn’t motivated by fear of Hell or hope of heaven, but a life driven by an authentic love. It’s our way of life that recognizes that Christianity isn’t about us. It’s not about self-

preservation, feeling good, or getting front row seats in heaven.

Being sheep of the shepherd isn't about us, nor about being saved, or getting rewards. Being sheep of the shepherd is about following our shepherd's lead, loving others as he loved us and gave himself for us, as offering and a sacrifice to God. The theme for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity sums up today's message. Do Good! Do Justice!

Amen.

WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY
JANUARY 22, 2023

PRAYERS

With faith and confidence, we come in prayer, before God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit: Creator God, today we live with the consequences of actions that have made life unsustainable for some and overabundant for others. Teach us to know how to use responsibly the resources you have given to us for the benefit of all and the respect of your creation. The groaning creation cries out to you.

Lord teach us ... **and show us the way.**

Compassionate God, help us repair the harm that we have inflicted upon each other and the divisions we have created among your people. Just as Christ Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit onto the disciples to birth the community of the new creation, send your grace to heal our divisions and gift us with the unity for which Jesus prayed.

Lord teach us ... **and show us the way.**

Christ, the way, the truth and the life, you embodied justice in your ministry on earth by the good that you did, breaking down the walls that divide and the prejudices that imprison. Open our hearts and minds to recognize that though we are many, we are one in you.

Lord teach us ... **and show us the way.**

Holy Spirit, you create anew the face of the earth. The summit of the mountains, the thunder of the sky, the rhythm of the lakes speaks to us, because we are connected ...

The faintness of the stars, the freshness of the morning, the dewdrops on the flower speak to us, because we are connected ...

The voices of the poor, the oppressed and the marginalised speak to us, because we are connected ...

But above all, our hearts soar to you for we cry out 'Abba, Father' as we pray:

Our Father....