

SHEEP AND GOATS
MATTHEW 25:31-46
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Today is the New Year's Eve of the church calendar. Next Sunday begins Advent, the first Sunday of the new church year; the day we begin waiting for the Christ-child to be born—sitting in darkness as the light slowly grows, one candle at a time. As we tend to do at the end of a year, last week we reflected on what the past year brought. We looked back and named many highs and scarcely any lows, and for that we are grateful. In fact, I'd say gratitude permeates this place. In twelve months together, we have seen and tasted that the Lord is good, and we continue to affirm that God is doing something new and good and exciting here. We've only caught a glimpse of it, but we know this new thing is moving and whirring around us. We get to be a part of it, and we are grateful.

This morning we sit between the reflections of a year gone by and the anticipation of Advent on a Sunday marked for the Reign of Christ. The final Sunday of our year invites us to reflect on the biblical metaphor of Christ as King. Quite an image for our in-between time and quite an image for the final week of our stewardship emphasis. During a time when we ask how we are called to be responsible for this church—its building, its people, its programs, its finances, its willingness to follow in the Way of Jesus—we consider the stuff of God's kingdom and Jesus' role as one who Reigns over it.

Some of you felt like I left you hanging last week. We read that Gospel text but didn't do much with it. The terrified servant buried his talent instead of investing it, and the master threatened to cast him out to the place where there is great wailing and gnashing of teeth. We read it but pressed pause on understanding it.

Let's consider it briefly as we move into the next part of Matthew 25, today's text. Jesus has told a trio of bizarre parables in chapters 24 and 25 about judgment, and this is the third. Forgive me for not exploring every angle of this parable as we could certainly linger here for a while. In short, a wealthy man gives his servants three, extraordinary sums of money as he deems them capable of managing. Even the smallest amount, 1 Talent, is a significant loan of cash. The three servants are expected to use the money wisely and report back to the master. Two invest and increase the capital while one is terrified and hides it. He protects what he has been given but does not do anything

meaningful with it because he is so afraid of the one who gave it to him. The master responds as one who is worthy of fearing and orders him to be cast out.

What do we make of this text? The standard interpretation for years has been that the master is God, we are the servants, and we are to use the gifts God gives us wisely. But current scholarship rejects the idea that this is a simple parable where each character is fully understood.

For example, Brian McLaren writes, “my leaning these days is to refrain from reading violent kings or masters in parables as referring to God. My bias is to associate the kingdom of God/kingdom of heaven with that which is rejected, persecuted, killed, banished, tortured ... as Jesus was. In Matthew 25, then, Jesus and his followers are associated with:

- a) the servant who refused to play the game of the master's exploitive...economy, and
- b) the imprisoned, naked, homeless ...

That doesn't solve all interpretive problems (in fact, it creates some new ones), but it seems to resonate most with the whole tenor of Jesus' life, mission, and message.”

Similarly, Jim Somerville of First Baptist Richmond, Virginia, focused on the master's promise of reward to the two servants who invested the money he gave them. Somerville suggests we consider the phrase, “Enter into the joy of your master,” and wonders “what the joy of that particular master would be. He was a harsh man, who reaped where he did not sow and gathered where he did not scatter--the Donald Trump of his day. What would give him joy? What kind of party would he throw? And how might it be different from the party Jesus, our Master, would throw? Jesus may not have trusted us with ridiculous amounts of money, but he has trusted us with his church, his mission, life itself. What have we done with what he has given us, and have we done it in a way that will give him joy?”

It seems this parable is best considered in tension with the verses assigned as today's Gospel text. Hold the questions of wealthy master and resistant servant in mind as we move forward into the final verses on judgment—the separating of the sheep from the goats.

There's a scene in a popular TV drama depicting a conversation between the Vice President and White House Chief of Staff. The Vice President states confidently, “As the Bible says, ‘Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.’ To which the Chief of Staff replies, “That's not from the Bible. Not everything is from the Bible, Sally.”

Sheep and Goats. This is one of those phrases often extracted from its context and used to describe “us” and “them” in ways that do not honor the Matthew 25 text. “You know, God says he'll separate the sheep from the goats” meaning us good guys and those old

so-and-sos. But Jesus has just told a complex parable that raises questions about power and joy and wealth and being responsible with the things we possess. And now Jesus moves to a new image for discerning who has been faithful to his Way. We mustn't be too confident that we know for sure which side we are on. We must approach this text humbly and with an eagerness to hear what is being said that we might live it out.

The image now is Jesus on a throne, he is a King. His subjects are before him and being separated into two categories—those who got it right and those who got it wrong. It's a shocking scene both to the reader and to those being divided. And they are being divided based on their acts of hospitality. The King is not associated with the way the invested and expanded finances but the way they welcomed the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the imprisoned, the sick, the stranger. Both the ones who welcomed and the ones who did not welcome are surprised by this judgment because they do not associate the King with their hospitable or inhospitable acts. Even the ones who got it right do not understand how they got it right.

So the King clarifies, "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." In the context of Matthew 25, these members of Jesus' family are followers of the Way—his Way. These are the members of his upside-down kingdom where last are first and least are greatest. They are most likely the ones who have gone out into the world to share their stories of encounters with him. To welcome them as Christ welcomed them was to enter into the kingdom of God.

Who do we welcome? Who do we fail to welcome? What are we responsible for protecting, nurturing, growing in this place? Who is our master? Is it the one who reaps where he doesn't sow or the one whose family is made up of the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger? If the kingdom of God is made up of the "least of these," then what kind of King is Jesus? We must consider what these text tell us about the life we are called to live as people of God, and we must judge for ourselves if we are living as sheep or living as goats. The answer is in how we welcome all.

Have you followed the story of Arnold Abbott in Fort Lauderdale, Florida?¹ He's a World War II veteran, 91-years-old, and has spent the past 20 years feeding a weekly hot meal to homeless people at Beach Park. They feed up to 250 people in one hour.² The new mayor has created restrictions against feeding the homeless, but Arnold Abbott refuses to listen. He has been arrested four times in the past four weeks and is prepared to be arrested again. He claims that the powerful, wealthy leaders of the city want to

¹ <http://www.cnn.com/2014/11/04/justice/florida-feeding-homeless-charges/>

² <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/defiant-fla-homeless-advocate-busted-won-stop-article-1.2018467>

erase the face of homelessness without addressing the root causes or the reality of poverty. They want to move it somewhere else and away from their streets and parks.

Abbott won't back down and is suing the city alongside two pastors citing their religious convictions compel them to care for the poor. Abbot adds, "I spent 50 years of my life fighting for civil rights. I went down to Mississippi ... and had a lot of Ku Klux Klan people to contend with down there so I'm not the least worried about the Fort Lauderdale police department," he responded to the citation. "I will not stop. With every breath of my body I will be fighting them."

We're standing at the edge of something here, St. Charles. Today is a day for making commitments to each other as a congregation. Our tradition calls it "pledging", and we send out pledge cards and talk about pledging the budget. But that's inadequate. We're making a solemn promise for the year ahead. We're standing at the edge of something new and vowing that the way we welcome, the way we love, the way we use our resources, and the way we live out our faith will be in line with the kingdom of God.

May we not play it safe. May we be bold.

May we understand that financial support is not the same as committing our lives to the Way of Jesus. May our we commit to God and to each other every aspect of who we are.

May we not just think about bottom lines and balanced budgets but about using everything that we have to seek justice in Jesus' name.

May we welcome to this place, truly welcome, all who are children of God—even when it scares us, or stretches us, or shakes us up. Especially then.

May we not move forward aimlessly in the way of inertia. May we move forward in unified prayer that the God who created us in the Divine Image will guide us to live into the Way of Jesus with every breath of our bodies.

May God's kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven.

We prepare to stand and sing our closing hymn, a hymn of commitment. As we do, I invite all who desire to make a promise for the year ahead to come forward to the table. If you have a pledge card to leave at the table, please place it in the basket. If you would like to receive a prayer card with a images and guide to prayer for the new year, please come to the table and take one as a promise to link your life with this congregation in the months to come. We do so with gratitude for what has been, delight in what is, and with bold expectation for what is to come.

Won't you come as we sing?