

A Question of Judgment

Matthew 25: 31-45

The parable of the sheep and the goats is the last story in the last teaching discourse by Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. Essentially, it is the last word before the events leading directly to Jesus' crucifixion. This is a great story for liberals who still like to exercise a little judgment and condemnation every once in awhile, who like to see the bad guys get it. Why is this a story for liberals?

First of all, it's about the underclass, all those left out or ignored or even exploited by those in power. It is about the hungry, thirsty, homeless, and destitute, those without health insurance, and those in prison. Liberals love to be reminded that Christ, the focus of our faith, is really present in "the least of these." Second, it teaches that God's evaluation of our lives is determined solely by our treatment of "the least of these." It is not doctrinal or a matter of orthodoxy, but a matter of how you treat the poor. Third, it reminds us that there are ultimate consequences for how we live and how we treat "the least of these"

As you hear this story, what are you hearing? What is the message? Does this story raise any questions for you?

The Linn brothers Dennis and Matthew (a Catholic priest), along with Dennis' wife Sheila, used this parable as the basis of a book (*Good Goats*) to illustrate a process for "healing our image of God." They told this parable as part of a presentation they did for a group of elderly retired Roman Catholic nuns. The focus was their idea that a loving God would not send people to hell, would never condemn them to everlasting torment—that God's love would always provide a way out.

So, one sister raised her hand and said, "But what about the story of the sheep and the goats? It says right there that the sheep go to heaven and the goats go to hell."

Dennis responded by asking the whole group, "How many of you, even once in your life, have done what Jesus asks at the beginning of the passage and fed a hungry person, clothed a naked person or visited a person in prison? All the sisters raised their hands. Dennis said, "That's wonderful! You're all sheep!"

Then Dennis asked, "How many of you, even once in your life, have walked by a hungry person, failed to clothe a naked person or not visited someone in prison?" Slowly, all the sisters raised their hands. Dennis said, "That's too bad. You're all goats." The sisters looked worried and perplexed. Then suddenly one very old sister's hand shot up. She blurted out, "I get it! We're all good goats!"

And that sister did get it. She understood that language about heaven and hell is symbolic language. Heaven and hell are not specific geographical places. They are symbols of inner realities, of states of being. All of us who have felt alienated, unloved, and overwhelmed by shame or helplessly caught in an addiction know what it's like to be in hell. All of us who have been welcomed home, who have seen our goodness reflected in the affirming eyes of another or who have been loved into recovery know what it's like to be in heaven. We all have sheep and goats within us. The Kingdom of God is within us and we're all good goats."

How does that revelation change the meaning of this story for you?

Many of us get into the habit of treating stories and teachings from the Bible as the last word, the ultimate authority, in terms of who God is and how the universe works. How different would our sense of the Bible be, and this parable of the sheep and the goats, if we were to treat it as the first word, the beginning of a conversation, and not the end of it?

If the parable of the sheep and the goats is the last word about God's judgment, and if that judgment is final, irrevocable and eternal, then those who don't minister to the least of these—at least more often than failing to minister—have got a real problem. In other words, we all could be in eternal trouble.

If this story is the first word, however, a conversation begins—a dialogue. We begin to see ourselves not as victims of a condemning God, but as whole people. As we begin to see God present in the “least of these” it suddenly dawn on us that God is present in us as well, wherever we are and however we are feeling.

The key to this story is how surprised everyone was. The goats were surprised that they had missed seeing God in the least of these they had ignored. The sheep were also surprised that they had missed seeing God. Everyone was surprised just like everyone is a bit surprised when they realize that God is actually really present in the poor and outcast, actually really present in the rich and outcast, actually really present in Christian and non-Christian alike—in stranger and in enemy and in us ourselves--present not in part but the whole. All of God is in each of us. *Meister Eckhart put it this way: the seed of God is in us. Now the seed of a pear tree grows into a pear tree; and hazel seed grows into a hazel tree; a seed of God grows into God.*

We are reminded almost daily that we live in a world where there is a great deal of suffering, the same as in Jesus' day. He chose to live open to the suffering of others. He chose not to avoid the pain that came as a result of living his life with compassion and integrity. His own suffering stands in judgment of our lives when we are reluctant to enter the crucible on behalf of the suffering people in our world. What we should do to move forward on the journey of faith in response to such suffering is not a difficult question to answer. It's just a difficult answer to *live*.

Addressing the structural and systemic causes of a lot of the world's suffering—through policy changes and political action—can be as difficult as responding to those needs through food pantries, clothes closets, soup kitchens, home repair, and emergency assistance. But addressing root causes of chronic suffering involves serious transformation. It means changing ourselves and how we relate to others. It also means changing how we structure our society. As people of faith, we are called to address the root causes of suffering and pain in our lives and also in our world. We are called to make changes in oppressive structures and policies. And we are also called to make changes in attitude globally, nationally, locally, and personally.

What is the vision of church that can sustain us on the journey? What is the mission that can guide our way? Church is a place of refuge, a place we come for healing of wounds. It is a place to meet our need for community: for friends, company, and guidance on the journey. But the path forward is not found by focusing only on our suffering and getting our needs met. It is found by seeing the needs of others and by giving ourselves to address the suffering of others in ways that are effective, ways that reflect the values of Christ, the values of divine love, in ways that reveal Christ's presence in us and in others. The path forward for each of us and for this congregation is not just in embracing our own suffering and seeking our own healing, but in turning outward to see and address the pain and seek the healing of others in Jesus' name

Church is a great laboratory to practice loving. We are each here because we choose to be at Crossroads because we feel drawn to a community that seeks to build and deepen relationships, aims to learn to trust and love. We are here to practice loving ourselves by speaking and hearing truth in love. We are here to practice loving others by not turning away or lashing out when we're afraid, but by turning toward each other, leaning in to each other, and leaning on each other for support and love.

It is really that simple and that hard. We start where we are, but this parable reminds us not to stop there. We start by beginning to love and accept ourselves. One simple way is to practice that is to look at yourself in the mirror, look deeply into the eyes of the one reflected there. If you do that, even for a short while, you will begin to fall in love with yourself. We move forward by learning to love and trust each other. Look at your neighbor in the eyes, friend or stranger. You will begin, as Jewish theologian Martin Buber called it, to move from an “I-it” relationship to an “I-thou” relationship. Another excellent way to learn to love and trust others is to engage someone in a 1-on-1 conversation designed to move to a deeper level of awareness and of trust.

Love for self and love for friends and family ultimately needs to grow and develop into love for the stranger, love for the enemy, and love for the God who is revealed in stranger and enemy, love that grows through practice.

What does the parable of the sheep and goats mean for us today? Well, where do you see yourself in it? Are you a good goat? Fr. Richard Rohr has written

Most of us were taught that God would love us if and when we change. In fact, God loves you so that you can change. What empowers change, what makes you desirous of change, is the experience of love. When we fall into God's mercy, when you fall into God's great generosity, you find, seemingly from nowhere, this capacity to change. No one is more surprised than you are. You know it's a gift!

We are church to learn to open that gift, To try it on and wear it around. We are alive on this earth to learn to embrace that gift. The giving and receiving of God's love for us are never conditional. We are loved anyway—fully accepted. We are part of each other and intimately one with God. The question remaining is what we will do about it as individuals and as a congregation? How will we give life to the love that comes welling up from the depths of our loves and comes crashing into the hidden places of our hearts? All of it is a deep joy, all of response to this love. When we love as the life of Jesus showed us, it costs us our lives and we are born again.

Draw compassion from us, Eternal God, as life calls to life, as Spirit blesses Spirit. We release all that stands between us and receiving love, between us and being love. We embrace your divine presence in us and through us. Amen.