

November 26, 2017
The Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost

“Don’t Be a Goat”
by Mary Anne Biggs

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24 ~ Matthew 25:31-46

Our gospel today is another biblical Judgment parable. Matthew has set three in a row like beads on a string ... just before launching his Crucifixion account. In all three Jesus is describing the kingdom of heaven ... (“*the kingdom of heaven*” being an apocalyptic code phrase for the end of all human kingdoms and the ultimate reign of God).

“*The kingdom of heaven is like*” ten bridesmaids waiting for the bridegroom, but five let their oil run out and are not ready when the bridegroom comes. “*The kingdom of heaven is like*” three slaves entrusted with great wealth, but one of them buries his share in fear. And today, “*The kingdom of heaven is like*” the way a shepherd divides between sheep and goats. In each parable the Judgment comes suddenly ... the division is decisive, and everybody ... blessed or cursed ... is surprised.

We can hardly relate to anything in these parables. The apocalyptic image of a “kingdom of heaven” registers almost zero on our interest scale. We don’t seem to worry about God judging anybody for any reason ... let alone holding us accountable for social justice. And we don’t really expect some sudden interruption of human history ... or Divine intervention in human affairs.

So, when it comes to being set up for the eschatological trifecta of inattention, fear, and apathy, we’re prime candidates for a shock. I think we find these quaint parables of a God ... who holds people accountable ... antiquated.

For instance, what does Jesus have against goats? They’re cute, and they yield good cheese for our gourmet pizzas. I have a particular fondness for goats, because that is what our son called me when he was just learning to talk. I would point to John and say, “Who’s this?” and he would answer “Da Da.” I’d then point to myself and say, “Who’s this” and he would respond “Goat!” I never understood why until one evening when I was reading his favorite book to him, “Baby Animal Sounds.” And I realized that it said, “The sheep goes Baa Baa ... and the goat goes Maw Maw.”

Of course, the point is not that goats are evil, per se, but that a division is coming. The sheep are named winners because in Matthew, Jesus speaks of his own people as “the lost sheep of the House of Israel” (Matt 10:6) and his disciples as “sheep among wolves” (Matt 10:16). And in Matthew’s scripture tradition “Shepherd” had long been a nickname for God and for God’s chief representative, the reigning King or “Messiah.”

How quickly this parable moves from an ordinary pastoral image ... to the ultimate scene of eschatological destiny ... by equating the Son of Man with the Shepherd- King-Judge of all. But again, all of this imagery may be lost on us who are not goat ropers, have no King, and don't believe in judgment.

Jesus says "*all the nations,*" will be gathered at the King's throne and divided like a shepherd divides sheep and goats. After the division the Shepherd King says to the surprised sheep: "*Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world!*" And why?

"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."

The sheep ... surprised this is happening at all ... are now shocked by the basis for reward ... because they have no recollection of doing any such thing for Jesus, ever.

"Lord, when?" "*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?*" Which is to say: "Who knew?"

"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!" Jesus' answer asserts our incarnational theology ... that Christ in the flesh is God standing in solidarity with humanity ... the Divine Spirit abiding in all of us ... especially those Mother Teresa called "Christ in his most distressing disguises."

Then the King turns to the goats, and says, "*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.*"

The goats ... likewise surprised this is happening at all ... are now shocked and distressed, and like the sheep they say, "Who knew?" "*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?*" If they had recognized him in a time of need, of course they would have helped ... the way they would assist any person of consequence by which they might gain.

The whole point of course, is that *every* person is a person of consequence to Jesus ... *every* person bears the Divine image ... carries the Spirit of Christ ... is a beloved child of God who deserves to be treated with the dignity and care that we would offer Christ himself.

We know this. But we forget this. And like so many amnesiacs ... every reading this passage finds us asking again, “*Who knew?*” But Jesus holds the goats accountable anyway, “*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.*”

Who are the sheep and who are the goats in this scary parable? For that matter, who are “the least of these?”

The translation we use in worship reads “*just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.*” More precisely, Jesus says “*the least of these my brothers.*” Elsewhere in Matthew Jesus uses the very same phrase in a particular way.

In Matthew 12, when told his mother and brothers are waiting outside to see him, he points to his disciples and says, “*Here are my mother and my brothers!*” (Matt 12:49). And at his tomb the resurrected Christ tells the frightened women, “*Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.*” (Matt 28:10)

These are the same “brothers” to whom Jesus shortly gives the Great Commission: “*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*” (Matt 28:19-20).

Do you hear the echoes of today’s passage? “*My brothers?*” “*All nations?*” “*I am with you always?*” Who are “*the least of these my brothers,*” in whom Jesus is present in hunger and thirst ... in estrangement and nakedness ... and sickness and imprisonment? They include Jesus’ disciples as they go out to complete his mission in the world.

So, as much as this judgment scene affirms social justice, it is also about the disciples fulfilling the mission of the church. This passage is asking us ‘Are we the kind of church willing to risk being hungry and thirsty and strange and naked and sick and imprisoned to embody Christ to the world?’ Are we Jesus’ own family ... the least of these with whom he promised always to be present?

And here is where I have to shift from proclamation to celebration today because, beloved, I have seen you feed the hungry ... give drink to the thirsty ... welcome the stranger ... clothe the naked ... care for the sick ... and visit the imprisoned ... year after year. You have paid a price in time and treasure and even reputation to do so, and I see Christ in you in all these good ministries. Well done! Way to go! Keep going! This is the way Christ enters the world and extends his dominion ... heart by heart ... soul by soul ... person-to-person.

The parable about the sheep and the goats is not a checklist for earning your way into God’s graces through acts of compassion. It’s a call to mission and to an unconscious way of being. The sheep and the goats are people who instinctively care – or don’t! – who habitually

help – or don't! – who naturally engage – or don't! – in ways that reflect Christ is in them. So, the obvious lesson to take from this parable is this: Don't be a goat! Do Christ's embodied work in the world until it becomes your deep-wired habit ... who you are ... an unconscious second nature ... your way in the world.

For Christ is among us and within us ... hidden in ways we don't see ... but present in both the person who helps ... and the person who needs it. This parable wants you to ask yourself, "Is Christ in me?" This parable wants to ask you, "Do you see Christ in the people around you?" But when the time comes it won't let you ask "Who knew?" You knew.

May we pray?

Christ, our Shepherd and our Sovereign,

Give us eyes to see you, and hearts to love you, and courage to be you for the world in need around us even as you send others to be Christ for us. May we continue your work of love and justice until the day we rejoice in the place you have prepared for us in your holy name.

Amen.