

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
 Matthew 25:31-46, Christ the King Sunday

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Matthew 25:31-46

25:31 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. 32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, 33 and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. 34 Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 35 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, 36 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.' 37 Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? 38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' 40 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.' 41 Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; 42 for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43 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.' 44 Then they also will answer, '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?' 45 Then he will answer them, '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.' 46 And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

It's been anything but a quiet week here at Suttons Bay Congregational Church. Hunter Bell's exploratory surgery ruled out cancer but was otherwise inconclusive and now he has to return to Grand Rapids for more tests. Beth Skinner found out that last summer's chemotherapy didn't work and she started aggressive radiation treatments on Thursday. Danielle Vachow was taken to the emergency room and then admitted to the hospital for gall bladder surgery. Lucy Chase Stevenson was also taken to the emergency room with congestive heart failure and her white blood cell count revealed an infection. Stacey and I were scared witless—okay, I was scared witless and Stacey kept her cool—when we discovered someone who didn't belong there prowling around in the basement. Marty Johnson's beloved basset hound Hannah had to be put down after an injury. Clix Heerema turned 70 but wasn't celebrating when his car slid into the ditch on his birthday. And that's just seven of our members and friends—who knows what went on with the other ninety-four of you who are here this morning.

And now, as if all of this stuff going awry isn't enough—this morning, this Thanksgiving Sunday morning, we hear an indictment from Jesus in the Gospel reading. He tells us that any one of us who lets a person go hungry, or thirsty, or naked, or if we fail to visit the folks in prison—we're bound for eternal punishment. I don't know where that leaves you—but I'm on the fast track to weeping and gnashing of teeth if what Jesus said is true in the most literal sense. I admit that I am not always generous with what is mine. I sit on my money, or spend my money on material and foolish things, knowing full well that I should be sharing more of it with others. I've tried to block out the annoying ringing of the Salvation Army bell as I rushed into Target to buy hair color, or a magazine, or even fancy dog treats, and on the way out I dropped into the swinging red bucket only a fraction of what I had just spent on needless junk. When opportunities to sign up for prison chaplaincy have come my way, which they have many times, I've found plenty of reasons why I'm too busy to help when really, the issue is, that I'm scared and judgmental and just plain don't want to do it. When I pay my electric bill and have the

option to give a buck or two to a fund to help those who can't afford their utilities, I don't always do it—rationalizing that we don't have a lot of extra right now and I better hold onto what I've got because I might need it. And then, the very next day, I stop by Adelaide's on my way to work and use that couple of bucks to buy coffee and some artery-clogging treat. Obviously, I didn't really need to keep that extra few bucks and there's someone out there who needs heat for their home far more than I need a cup of coffee and scone.

From the way I act, you'd think I'd never heard these words from scripture before. And yet, I have. I've heard them before, I've preached them before, and I'll probably preach them again and yet I still stray from the path Jesus has set out before me. Do you know how this feels? Do you know how frustrating it is to know what you need to be doing and yet not to be doing it? And so I ask, why? Why do we continue to do the things we know we shouldn't do? Why will we eat until we're bursting on Thursday, spend a wad of money on the Biggest Shopping Day of the Year on Friday, and then not do a thing for the hungry or homeless on Saturday? Is it because we don't care about the hungry, naked, and imprisoned? I don't think so. Is it because we enjoy being on that fast track to weeping and the gnashing of teeth? Of course not. Is it because we figure that we worked, or are working, hard for our lifestyle and so we're entitled to live as we see fit? I know for me this is sometimes true. Is it because we feel like we do what we can when we can but don't make an effort to go out of our way to do more? Probably. I'd like to think that there isn't a one of us in this room who would walk by someone we know is hungry without doing something. And perhaps that's doing enough. But according to Jesus, it's not. Jesus is talking about the unnamed stranger and that could be anyone—the person coming into the food pantry, the homeless teenager in Traverse City, the mother imprisoned for carrying drugs because she couldn't find any other work in Detroit, a hurricane survivor in New Orleans, or one of the tens of thousands of shivering, homeless, hungry persons on a mountainside in Pakistan. As far as I can tell, these are the folks Jesus is talking about. And in the face of all that suffering, is it any wonder that we shut down and don't do as much as we could to help? The need is so immense, how would we even know where to start. And so, for a variety of reasons, none of them particularly good, we keep on keeping on even though Jesus promises that a path of entitlement and wealth at the expense of others leads us to eternal punishment.

And yet, how many times have we read, heard, and been taught that God's grace is a free gift that comes our way, not by virtue of our own goodness, but by God's goodness. Reformed doctrine teaches that we can't do anything to save ourselves, therefore, it would make sense that we also cannot do anything lose ourselves to eternal punishment—even neglect the hungry, thirsty, homeless, and imprisoned. But what then, is this story about the sheep and the goats all about?

There's a book that is very helpful in explaining this lesson from Jesus within the context of an understanding of a gracious God—a God who, no matter how bad we are, wouldn't send us away to eternal punishment. The book is called *Good Goats: Healing Our Image of God*, the title a direct reference to this passage from the Gospel according to Matthew. Dennis Shinn, one of the book's authors, writes the following.

A few years ago, we presented some of the ideas in this book [that God is merciful, loving and gracious to all] to a group of elderly retired Roman Catholic nuns. 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.”

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

It’s a helpful way to think about this passage. None of us are perfect—falling into the category of sheep. But, we’re not all so rotten as to deserve eternal punishment with weeping and gnashing of teeth. We’re someplace in between, like the elderly nun said, we’re Good Goats.

But, is that good enough—to just declare ourselves Good Goats and leave it at that? Aren’t we then just boldly disregarding what Jesus taught? Who are we to do that? The passage is clear—sheep will go to heaven with God, goats will face eternal punishment. Sheep are the ones who feed the sick, clothe the naked, and visit the imprisoned. Goats are the ones who don’t. It’s about as straight forward as Jesus gets. But, again, the authors of Good Goats have a bit different perspective. They write . . .

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, overwhelmed by shame or helplessly caught in an addiction know what it’s like to be in hell. And 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 wheat and weeds within us, sheep and goats. The kingdom of God is within us, and we’re all good goats.

This isn’t a way to excuse us from the responsibility Jesus has given us to care for one another; but rather, it’s encouragement. After all, what does a child who thinks he or she can’t do anything right, do? They do nothing, for fear of failing. That’s not the dynamic of the Christian life—that we do it all right all of the time or else. Rather, it’s a process, a life of trying. And Jesus is being clear about what we are to be trying to do, to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, and visit the imprisoned. And when we do, we’ll experience a little bit of heaven—it’s a lot better feeling than any hair color job, magazine article, or response from our dog to a fancy treat can bring. And when the end does come, when, as they say, our lives pass before us, it’s those moments of caring and sharing that we’ll be proud of. And when we see the ways we neglected the ones in need—when we didn’t feed, clothe, and visit with the Christ who is with us in each other, well then it’ll be hell to think that we didn’t do what we could have done.

And that's the Good News of Jesus Christ on this Christ the King Sunday, that we are all Good Goats, sometimes we get it right, sometimes we get it wrong, and sometimes we just don't get it at all. But, regardless we're loveable and deserving of love because that's the way God made us. And as for this very unsettled week in the life our church, well, we've a lot to be grateful for—the doctors are not out of options for Hunter, Beth is brave and surrounded by people who love her, Danielle came home on Saturday and called me to say that she's nestled in her favorite chair with knitting, reading, and the telephone too keep her busy as she heals, Lucy is back at home taking it easy and receiving treatment for an infection, Stacey and I are fine and the trustees are doing everything they can to assure that we are safe when we're here at work, Marti—well nothing can bring Hannah back but as you cherish the memories of your time together you can find peace in the knowledge that you didn't let her suffer—and her little spirit is obviously what led the Buckeyes to a win yesterday—woo-hoo, and Clix, and his car, are fine after his birthday ditch debacle. And so in gratitude that Christ is our King and in Thanksgiving that God has brought us together here this morning, let us pray.