

“LORD! LORD!” — SAYING AND DOING

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Introduction

I have spoken earlier of the artistry of those devoted to Jesus in the way they used poetry, ancient and new, metaphor and simile, to answer Jesus' question: "Who do you say that I am?" Jesus too is remembered as a supremely artful communicator. His metaphors and stories stay with us like precious nuggets we turn over and over, illuminated each time anew in often surprising ways.

I've often pondered this: Jesus never wrote anything down—at least we know of only one act of writing, and that was in sand. Instead he spoke—with words *and* deeds. He couched his most important pronouncements in similes and metaphors, sometimes in puzzling stories, deliberately intended to amuse, provoke, even shock his hearers into moments of recognition, illumination, and transformation. We call them parables.

Parables are a truly remarkable mode of communicating the heart of what you want to say, don't you think? I've often pondered the brazen courage of this communication, one I have not mustered either as a preacher or teacher, and I dare say few of you have either. Especially when we want to get the answers right we tend to go for the prosaic, the definitional. We wouldn't dare risk letting our hearers go away puzzled, or argue amongst themselves about what we might have meant. Just imagine instead of a 20 minute sermon you just told a short parable and then sat down. Or imagine if I were to do that now!

We will take the courage, nevertheless, to spend some time with one of Jesus' parables, one I find both tantalizing and deeply disturbing—which is rather typical, when you think about it, of most of Jesus' parables, the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats in Matthew 25:31-46.

Sheep and Goats

I begin with a few observations. While it is very well known, this parable is found only in the Gospel of Matthew. As many of you will be aware, that leads some to suspect they see the finger prints of Matthew all over this parable, doubting that it goes back to Jesus. I do not share their doubt, even if I think it indeed likely that we will find the finger prints of Matthew on it. Should that surprise us, and should it be any different, given that Jesus chose a means of communication that depended on others to pass it on, more, to pass it on in such a way that it would find resonance in new settings and contexts? In my view that is part of the mystery and wonder of the Word becoming flesh, of the word being entrusted to the creative and attentive memory of those whom the parable gripped in the first place. Our own listening to this parable here in Saskatoon in 2009 is yet another instance in which the parable is to be repopulated, so to speak, in which yet another set of sheep and goats confront the shocking tale of their own encounter with the Son of man come in glory to judge them.

What is the parable talking about?

In an obvious sense this parable speaks of the great judgment scene at the end of the age. Most, if not all, of Jesus’ audience, and Matthew’s, for that matter, would have shared the view that at the end point of the present age we will all stand before the divine judge and give account of what we have done in the body, as Paul puts it (2 Cor 5:10), even if the specific nature of that event is typically couched in imagery and metaphor, as in the case of this parable.

In this instance the judgment scene is described as taking place when the Son of man comes in glory (v. 31). But you’ll notice that rather quickly this becomes the “king” who presides over the judgment (v. 34), who acts like a shepherd, separating the sheep and the goats (v. 32). The details are both very evocative and at the same time strikingly imprecise.

Commentators like to explain that such separation would have been well known to those familiar with animal husbandry. In and of itself there is nothing about goats that makes them inferior to sheep, other than in this parable they represent those who are condemned. Too bad for goats, don’t you think? They’ve had an up-hill battle for respect ever since, at least among those of us who know nothing about actual goats. But here they stand for those heading for ruin. As to sheep, you will remember that they are not exactly an unambiguously positive symbol in the Bible. Any of you who have sung Handel’s *Messiah* know how delighted they are in going astray. Well, here sheep get to stand in for the righteous who will inherit the kingdom.

Whom do the sheep and goats represent?

The term in most of our translations is “all the nations” (v. 32). The term behind “nations” is “*ethnē*,” plural of *ethnos*, from which we derive the term “ethnic,” and means quite literally “nations.” It also very frequently refers to “Gentiles”, which thus literally means everyone who is not Jewish.

Perhaps in the ears of Jesus’ Jewish audience this parable refers then to the final judgment in which all of the Gentiles will appear before the divine Judge, to be judged according to how they treated God’s chosen people, the Jews. Even today, the term “righteous Gentile” is an important way of acknowledging how non-Jews have stood in solidarity with suffering Jews, most particularly during the holocaust. Should we be surprised that as the followers of Jesus tell and retell this parable, it becomes a way of signifying that how “the nations”—now *including* Jews—treat the suffering followers of Jesus, so they will be judged? In each case the audience views the parable from within the safety of knowing “they” will be judged by how they treated “us.”

There is, however, little that is safe about Jesus’ parables. So also in this instance. This is ostensibly about the “nations,” about “them,” the outsiders. But notice: *both* sheep and goats address the judge as “Lord”. This must mean more than “mister” or “master”, or “your honour.” The appellation “Lord” is hardly innocent, not in a world in which Jews reserved the title for God, not in a time when the followers of Jesus confessed him to be Lord, not in the New Testament, not in a parable such as this in which the one

addressed is the “Son of man.” Suddenly it is no longer about “them”, about “outsiders”, but about all of “us” who say “Lord,” who confess Jesus to be Lord.

This is, of course, not the only time that Jesus uses the outsider, the “other,” to force his hearers to think both about themselves and then, in turn, about those others. Recall the good Samaritan in Luke 10. For Jesus’ Jewish audience there were no “good” Samaritans. But Jesus uses the outsider, the enemy, to teach insiders about what it means to love the neighbour as oneself. Not only that. Jesus forces his hearers to rethink how they think about the outsider, about the presumably hostile other. So also in this instance. What seems to be about them, and is indeed about them, sneaks up on us and becomes a confrontation with us who confess Jesus to be “Lord.”

Let’s sit with this parable and re-hear it in light of our topic of confessing Jesus in a pluralistic world. Let’s let it unsettle us and our safe categories and assumptions, just as Jesus and Matthew after him intended for their audiences in their day.

What does this parable say to us today gathered here in Saskatoon?

In a sense I’m cheating, you know. We’re supposed to catch on to parables the way we catch on to jokes. You get them or you don’t. So I feel a little like I’m about to explain a joke. But never mind. Parables are not jokes, as much as they require us to “get it.” So, maybe like the disciples in Matthew 13 who ask a rather impatient Jesus to explain the parable of the Sower to them, we might need a bit of time. We can’t ask Jesus to explain it to us quite like they could, but we can prayerfully ask the Spirit of Christ to enable us to catch on. Maybe we’ll be like the guy who always laughed three times at a joke: once when it was told, then again when it was explained, and finally when he caught on. When it comes to the parables of Jesus, I suspect we’re still waiting to catch on. The explaining is taking a while. But, we’ll keep at it in the hope of finally catching on. And if we hear sporadic laughter at various moments (speaking metaphorically) we will rejoice that the Spirit of God is at work on our imaginations.

1. What does the parable tell us about Jesus?

If we hear Jesus’ question: “Who do you say that I am?” in light of this parable, how would we answer? We might answer: “You are the Son of man, that mysterious heavenly figure coming at the end of time; you are the king/the Messiah; you are the great Shepherd; you are the divine Judge, the one before whom all humanity must stand at the end of this age.

But then as we ponder the parable a bit longer, we might just come to realize that our high Christology might be getting in the way of a really good answer to Jesus’ question. It turns out to the surprise *both* of sheep and goats that the answer is: “You are the hungry, naked, sick, prisoner; you are the refugee hiding in the woods; you are the rape victim in the women’s shelter; you are the AIDS patient wasting away in front of her children; you are being tortured in a prison out of sight and out of hearing; you are the one without job, without home; you are the panhandler; you are the squeegee kid surviving on the street; you are the desperately lonely one no one wishes to befriend ... Need I go on? Such confessing takes its time and its toll.

Sure we know of Isaiah 53, and the Suffering Servant we cannot bear to look at, but we tend to restrict its relevance to Jesus’ suffering on the cross. But this parable, Matthew insists in his retelling of the parable, relates to the time *after* Good Friday and Easter, and *before* the coming of the Son of man as judge. Matthew insists that we hear this parable in *our* time, and thus come to terms with a hidden suffering Christ in the present, in *our* present.

This is almost too much to bear. And we’re tempted with Peter to argue with Jesus. How do you write praise music for such a Lord? How do you build cathedrals for such a one? I have not seen this Christ depicted in the domes of the great churches of the world. Isn’t it interesting that our fights with each other and the broader Christian church over Christology is never about *this* Christ, the one who resides in those we would just as soon not take note of? At the Basel Münster or cathedral there is a relief on the outside of it depicting Saint Martin sharing his clothes with the beggar. Only, during the *Bildersturm* (that orgy of iconoclasm or image destruction that came with the Reformation) the beggar was removed from the scene, lest it his presence lead to “works righteousness.” How ironic: good Reformation theology led to the removal of Christ from the scene (!).

Is this the Christ we confess? Is this Jesus hidden in the poor, the sick, and the oppressed the one we confess? Is our Christology high enough to go so low? Do we answer Jesus’ question: Lord, you are the least of our brothers and sisters.

2. *What does the parable tell us when we listen to it as being “about us”?*

a. *confession and action*

You will recall that both sheep and goats address the judge as “Lord.” As I indicated earlier, this means more than “mister,” “master”, or “your honour.” There is no way to avoid a Christological overtone here. Given that, two quite different texts came to mind as I was reflecting on this parable. In 1 Cor 12:3, Paul states bluntly: “No one can say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit.” Put that alongside Jesus’ words at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 7:21-23:

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day [surely a reference to the great judgment day] many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?’ Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.’”

Luke’s version of this chilling exchange contains what I think is a deliberate allusion to those who have been participating in the bread and wine of the church’s celebrations.

Luke 13: ²⁶ Then you will begin to say, ‘We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.’ ²⁷ But he will say, ‘I do not know where you come from; go away from me, all you evildoers!’

So, our first response to Jesus’ question about whether we “get” the parable might be something as obvious and as hard as: it’s not about talk; it’s about walk. Of course it’s about talk too. As Paul tells us in Romans 10:

⁹“If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.”

Of course getting our word-answers right in response to Jesus’ question to us matters. But as that famous incident recounted in Mark 8 (cf. Matt 16, Luke 9) reminds us, Peter could get the answer right and fail the exam miserably because he did not understand where a high Christology leads, namely, to the very depths of humiliation, whether in identification with those who suffer the ravages of sin, oppression, and poverty, or as a consequence of running afoul of the powers.

The writers of the New Testament, whether of gospels or letters, knew full well that you can’t get the Christological answer right without coming to terms with the complete identification of Jesus with those who suffer at the margins of society, who fall victim to power and privilege, who are ravenous to finally experience the justice of the kingdom of God. And you can’t get that right without yourself being drawn into that identification—taking up *your own* cross, as Jesus insists immediately after the test on his identity in Mark 8 (and parallels). In short, confess not just with your lips, but with your lives! Not everyone who says “Lord Lord,” not everyone with a high Christology, an orthodox trinitarian confession, a verbal and theological grasp of the unique status of Jesus as God’s son, as the divine Word become flesh, as Wisdom incarnate, as the second person of the trinity, will inherit the kingdom of God.

The confession of the church, the public witness of the church, has always only been faithful when *lived* in conformity with Christ, in conformity not with the cosmic emperor whose army is the rich west, but with the one present in the poor and powerless. Not only is the integrity of our own personal confession at stake in whether we get talk and walk synchronized, but so is the integrity of the confession of the church as a whole. As and aside, as the centre of gravity of the church moves to the global south, we might wonder whether it is moving closer to where Jesus resides. Might our confession become truer in the process? Again, those of us attending the MWC assembly in Asuncion had an opportunity to ponder that.

b. becoming ignorant

Even that might not go deep enough, however. One of the most unsettling aspects of this parable is that *both* sheep and goats say the exactly the same thing: they *both* address the Son of man as “Lord.” And did you notice that they *both* have the same speech with respect to the poor, the hungry, the imprisoned, the naked? But the meaning of their words is completely different.

When informed of what they have done, the sheep say: “Lord, that was you? We gave them food because they were hungry! We gave them shelter because they were homeless!” The sheep are much like the Samaritan who gives no indication of any pious

motivation, that he hopes God is noticing. He just responds to the needs of the person left injured on the side of the road. We often point to the religious motivation of the priest and the Levite *not* to get involved. We fail to notice the absence of any obvious religious motivation on the part of the one whom Jesus holds up as an example of fulfilling the greatest commandment. Put simply, the sheep are Samaritans.

And now notice the goats. Exactly like the sheep they say: “Lord, that was you? We thought it was only the homeless guy; we thought it was only the prisoner. Had we known that was you, we would have been there, you can count on it!” The goats are not averse to religious obligation. And they know enough Christology to say “Lord.”

In whom do you recognize yourself? In the sheep? Good for you. Or, if you’re like me, you might just have discovered yourself in the goat, who would want to assure the judge that had I known that elementary justice, the elementary exercise of what the Bible calls *shalom*, was nothing less than service to you, I would have done it.

c. *works righteousness?*

We might be getting restless. This sounds like works-righteousness! What happened to grace? I thought it wasn’t about what we did, but about whom we believe in. What’s with unmerited grace as the only and at the same time sufficient basis of our standing before God? Didn’t Jesus pay it all, and thus free us from obligation and duty as the way to inheriting the kingdom? Too bad Jesus (the Jew) couldn’t have taken some lessons from Paul (the Evangelical).

However harsh Jesus might seem to be coming across in this parable, this is all about grace. Even Jesus’ telling us this unsettling parable is an act of grace. Grace, the love *and justice* of God at work, is not about giving us an out, but of enabling us to participate in God’s mending of creation, reclaiming of that which is lost and broken. The painful truth of this parable is grace at work.

And just in case we think Paul sings from a different hymn book (or Power Point, as the case may be), recall Paul’s rhetorical question at the beginning of Romans 6, just after he has so movingly described God’s enemy love at work in Christ in chap 5: “Should we sin that grace might multiply?” “Never!” Paul responds with exasperation, already anticipating the Protestant and Evangelical heresy that would so fatally take root in our soul, individually and corporately. Grace is about raising us to the newness of life, in which we are, as Paul puts it just a few verses later, slaves of justice, fully at the disposal of the one we call Lord. “Justification” is not first and foremost a declaration of innocence as God’s transforming restorative justice at work, rendering us capable of doing justice. It is goats who bank on grace as an alibi from the scene of the catastrophe of human sin and suffering. It is sheep who stop and do the work of their master, like slaves of justice, even if they’re too busy to note who it is who is suffering before them. Notice, it is God’s grace that has saved us, yes, as Ephesians 2 shouts out twice (vv. 6 and 8), but then brings it home with: You are God’s work of art, saved by grace and created *for* good works—that is, for the work of bringing honour to the divine artist through the practice of justice, of peace, of love (v. 10).

Neither Jesus nor Paul, to say nothing of James, ever let us forget that our confession is hollow, more, is counterfeit, if it is not tethered to a life of service to others,

which turns out to our surprise, *if* we are sheep, to have been service to the one we call Lord.

Such a confession is by its very nature a public confession, a powerful witness to the grace of God for all to see. As Alan Kreider has shown in his *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom*, the early church grew exponentially when it was ironically *not* allowed to propagate the faith verbally, but did exactly what the sheep are commended for in this parable.

3. *What do we hear when we listen to the parable as told “about them”?*

Parables are not stable. Like a kaleidoscope they let us see different things each time we look. So, let’s look again. Is there something this parable can tell us “about them,” those not obviously part of the community that names Jesus as Lord?

As we have already pointed out, at its most obvious this parable speaks of the judgment of the “nations,” the “Gentiles,” the “others.” In finding among the nations both sheep and goats, Jesus is destabilizing the notion of who is in and who is out, who is acceptable and who is not for his Jewish audience. Matthew intends the same for his audience. We too are invited as Christians to ponder whether the lines we draw are the same ones Christ will exercise on that day.

Our confession in a pluralistic world

Please don’t misunderstand me. I’m in no way wishing to downplay the importance of getting the answer right to Jesus’ question regarding who we think he is. We will, and we should, continue to struggle for a full and faithful Christology. But remember where we started last night, recognizing that early believers in Jesus confessed Jesus in relation to the most comprehensive categories they knew: they confessed him to be the wisdom of God that brought this world in its wondrous diversity into being, the Wisdom that accompanied humanity in its efforts to learn to live right, and followed errant humanity into the depths of its abject failure to do so, a Wisdom that gave everything —everything!—for the liberation and restoration of her precious creation.

And remember what we said this morning: Christ is *our* peace, yes, but the “our” is always made up of “us” and “them,” in the process of being drawn into the birth of the new humanity. The disposition or orientation at the very heart of the gospel is to find and to bring home those who are lost, to make peace between enemies, to bridge the divides between people, peoples, and most especially between them and God their parent and creator. That is the work of Christ, of Wisdom, of Peace. And that needs to mark our disposition and shape our imagination no less.

This has great importance in our pluralistic world. As I see it, we are tempted in two directions: the first is to insist that only those who sound like we do, who speak our Christological language, will inherit the kingdom. We are in danger then of being goats who wish to deny the sheep their inheritance since they were surprised not to have recognized the living Christ in those they served. Evidently, when Christ appears and we all appear before him, surprises await us as to where Christ will find sheep among us. We might at that time be asking not only, “When were you hungry, and thirsty, and naked?” but perhaps also, “How come *they* inherit the kingdom? How come she gets to go to your

right?” With this parable Jesus wishes to rattle at our smugness and our certainty about how God’s judgment will fall. We can be absolutely certain about this: God’s judgment will be informed by God’s justice, love, and grace.

The temptation in the other direction is to trivialize the gospel by making the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus one variant among many “myths,” “stories,” “traditions”. It is true, we do live with myth—if we understand thereby the life-forming, imagination-shaping matrix of convictions and perspective. If only Jesus inhabited that myth-like place more fully for us all!. And yes, we tell stories, more, we live by and in them—that is what it means for us to rehearse the gospel, the good news of Jesus in all its manifoldness. And, yes, our imaginations are shaped by traditions, more, even, than we are conscious of.

But none of that means that we are not telling the story that is true for the whole world, that spells hope for all peoples, that witnesses to a Christ who is the wisdom that brought this world into being, that pervades all people and all peoples, that is at work in reconciling broken and alienated humanity. That means that the truth we hold points not to itself, or to how well we tell it, but to the Christ who is creator and saviour, but also to that same Christ who is present, if hidden, in places we cannot even begin to imagine.

Our ability to tell that story may be inadequate. As Paul reminds us, not many of us are wise, not many of us brilliant, and not many of moral heroes (1 Cor 1:26-31). But we tell a story, remembering that what it points to is much bigger than our words, much bigger than our words at their most artistic, at their most evocative.

Just so, regardless of how inadequate or impressive are the words of our confession, regardless of the orthodoxy of our Christology, regardless of the ease with which we acclaim with our lips that Jesus is Lord, if we do not practice justice, hunger for beauty, and yearn for a living relationship with our Lord, perhaps especially the one who resides in the least of these his brothers and sisters, our confession, whether in prayer, song, or liturgical recitation, quickly becomes the “Lord, Lord” that has no standing with Christ.

That said, for us who pray to be counted among the sheep our confession needs to go so deep that it becomes a matter of a habit of the heart, something that wells up because residing within us is the mind of Christ, as Philippians 2 puts it, a disposition not of self-preoccupation about how good, holy, or faithful we are, about how just, peaceful, or Anabaptist we are, but one of attentiveness to the needs of others to the point where it will become a surprise that it was the hidden Christ we were serving. If our confession does not do that, then the highest orthodoxy becomes heresy. Let’s put it this way. There is no orthodoxy that is not orthopraxy.

As uncomfortable as this might make us, a bit of “fear and trembling” in the working out of our salvation is fitting, as Paul reminds as well in Phil 2:12, immediately after the great Christological hymn we have been pointing to repeatedly. But, lest we despair, he reminds us in the very next verse that it is *God* who is at work in us sheep-wanna-bees, “both to will and to do his good pleasure.” Thanks be to God for his inexpressible grace.

Conclusion

- We get Christology right when we confess that we have encountered none other than the living God in Jesus, and have come to recognize in him that God loves the world—this world in which we live—with a love that goes beyond knowing, but which we glimpse in both the lavishness of creation and in the horror of the cross.
- We get Christology right when our gratitude and humility alike finds expression in the art of our worship in word and deed.
- We get Christology right when our confession takes us out of ourselves, out of the safety of our clearly formed categories and familiar recitations, and we join Christ in the world, where he already is—too seldom confessed, even more seldom followed, all too often still hidden in those who suffer. In short, we get our Christology right when our talk is inseparable from our walk, and vice versa.

Let’s let the brother of Jesus sum this all up for us:

The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of justice is sown in peace by those who make peace. (James 3:17-18)

May God be gracious to us and give us both the desire and the courage to answer Jesus’ question about who we think he is, not only with our words— *our very best words!*--but with our lives—*our very best lives!*

AMEN