

“Sheep and Goats”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
November 23, 2014 – Christ the King Sunday

Matthew 25: 31-46

I always wondered how goat farmers felt whenever they read this story from the Gospel of Matthew. I mean, goats are good animals, aren't they? I did an internet search entitled, “benefits of goats,” and here are some of the positive attributes listed for goats: meat; milk; they clear land; they can be pack animals, carrying gear when you hike; use their dung as fuel; they can be trained and handled; they are inexpensive; goat milk can be made into soap – I'm not kidding (<http://smallfarm.about.com/od/Goats/a/Benefits-Of-Raising-Goats.htm>). It's amazing what you'll find on the web!

I didn't grow up in the country or on a farm, so my experiences with sheep and goats is limited to petting zoos or seeing them from afar as I'm driving through the countryside. To me, goats seem to be just as useful, relatively cute, and on an equal footing as sheep. I know sheep provide that nice warm wool that we all covet in the winter for our clothes. But otherwise, it has always seemed to me that Jesus unfairly gives goats an inferiority complex. And it seeps into our everyday culture and language, doesn't it? When a ballplayer makes an unforgivable mistake that costs his or her team a win, they're given the label “the goat.” How would things be different for goats in this world if Jesus had simply reversed his metaphor? We might instead hear a sportscaster say, “What an error! What a sheep!”

Alas, Jesus did not go this route, and so, goats are forever painted in a negative light. In this story, it's not so much that sheep are great and goats are awful, but rather where they are located in relation to Christ the King on his throne. “He will put the sheep at his right hand, and the goats at the left” (25:33). The right is considered the place of honor and power, while the left is considered the place of inferiority. On this day when we celebrate Christ as our King and Lord, we are met with a story that depicts separating the good from the bad, the righteous from the unrighteous, the sheep from the goats. And yet, where do we find ourselves in the midst of this story, and how are we called to live faithfully in its light?

Well, first consider the following. Have you ever done a good deed without thinking about it, or didn't realize how much it meant to another person? Maybe you've helped someone in the grocery store with an item she couldn't reach, or assisted him with loading groceries in his car. Perhaps you've stopped by and visited someone you hadn't seen in a while, and it absolutely made his or her day. Or you could

have simply asked how someone was doing – not in a casual way, but in a meaningful way – and it made a huge difference since no one had spoken to her all day. Many times, we do things instinctively for others without ever knowing how much they meant to that person.

But it also seems to happen the other way around, too. All too often we seem to pass by others who are in apparent need, and we rationalize our way out of it or make up some excuse so we don't feel the need to help them. Someone is trying to change a flat tire on the side of the road. A homeless man who comes up to your car window and will wash your windshield for any spare change. A single mother of four children who needs food and shelter for the night, but all you have is pity and shame. Or even someone we pass by in the hallway that appears unkempt or "different," and instead of a smile that would make him feel welcome, all we can muster is an indifferent scowl. How many times do our instincts work not only for good but also for bad?

That's what I first think of when I hear this story of Jesus about the last judgment and the separating of the sheep and the goats. Our instinct speaks directly to who we are, and doesn't allow us to gloss over our good intentions with humility, or our bad intentions with flowery language and excuses. Whatever is at our core is how we are going to act, and Jesus as king and judge will recognize that when he comes again.

It would make sense for the unrighteous to not remember when they passed by the sick, the hungry, or the imprisoned – they need an excuse and don't recall those problems being brought to their attention. But did you notice that it wasn't just the unrighteous who didn't recall those in need? It's also the righteous who didn't remember doing their good deeds. "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink, or a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing, or sick or imprisoned and visited you?" (25:37-39). It was at the core of their being to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, visit the sick and imprisoned. It is what is at our core, at the heart of our very selves, on which we will be judged, not on what we intended to do, or thought about doing, or wished we had done.

It is clear why this story shakes us out of our comfortable and insulated lives. Jesus identifies himself not just with the good, the successful, the hard-workers who have made it for themselves. He also identifies himself – even more so – with the poor, the rejected, the lonely and isolated of this world. He identifies himself with them to such a degree that he calls them "members of his family" (25:40), who even the least among them is one of his own. And he doesn't just identify himself as their brother or sister, but rather as if he is one of them. "Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (25:40). The hungry child, the homeless woman, the

imprisoned man – that is who God loves even more than each one of us, for they are each members of the family of God.

For the gospel writer Matthew, the point of this story is very clear. As one commentator puts it, “That relationship with God is not a matter of having faith but of doing faith, and that those who do not will be fed like so much trash into the fire that never goes out” (Barbara Brown Taylor, The Preaching Life, Cowley Publications, © 1993: 135-136). Sure, we can come to church, feel inspired by a sermon or an anthem or a song, go out feeling like Jesus is walking beside us, and all-around feel good about ourselves and our God. But unless we “do” our faith – put it into actions rather than just thoughts and words – well, then we’re not much more than a goat by the side of the road.

Lindsay Armstrong provides a very helpful analogy to our modern life with this story of sheep and goats. She talks about how each year she makes an appointment with her doctor for a wellness check. Her doctor pokes and prods, takes blood and other fluids, and she modifies her intake of food or amount of exercise based on the results. In her words: The checkup could save my life, and my insurance company thinks this is such a good idea that they pay the bill.

In many ways, Matthew’s depiction of the last judgment is like a wellness check. Its purpose is not to condemn or scare but to provide a snapshot of our overall health, development, learning, and growth that should lead to new habits and ways of life. After all, as our doctor wants us to flourish, so does our Creator, Redeemer, Judge and King.

(Our calling) is to do right at all times. Distancing ourselves from others, allowing apathy to grow in us like a tumor, expecting that our actions have no real consequences, or relying too heavily on past love and care of others are cynical concerns. The image of the Son of Man one day separating sheep and goats is a diagnostic tool designed to inspire faithfulness, root out self-centered living, and help us each measure who and where we are as we grow in the likeness of Christ.

If we cannot share freely and fully or if we do not make ourselves available to do so, this indicates that our relationship with God and the world is not as healthy and whole as Jesus’ triumph on the cross makes possible. Loving those for whom Jesus gave his life, particularly those who are undervalued, is a primary expression of our love of God and of our experience of God’s love for us.

We may not like warnings or wellness checks; after all, they ask us to recalibrate our lives. However, they provide a critical wellness overview that we are wise to tend, particularly since heart trouble plagues us all (Lindsay P. Armstrong, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2011: 333-337).

How does this story from Jesus act as a spiritual wellness check for us as individuals? Do we see our daily actions and initial instincts in a positive, healthy light? Or do we see them in a negative, unhealthy

light? Are we satisfied with the results of this examination, or are we motivated to improve on our spiritual health? What changes need to happen so that we might live every day more and more in the likeness and image of Jesus Christ our Lord?

How does this story from Jesus act as a spiritual wellness check for us as a church? Do we see our day-to-day ministry of worship, education, service, and spiritual development through the lens of feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, housing the homeless, visiting the sick and imprisoned? Do our initial instincts as a congregation reflect our love of Christ in the least of those around us, or do our initial instincts turn inward in self-centered ways? Are we satisfied with the results of this wellness check, or are we motivated to improve our spiritual health and outlook? What changes need to happen so that we at John Knox Presbyterian Church might live every day more and more in the likeness and image of Jesus Christ our Lord?

Honestly, in the end, I don't think Jesus is concerned about whether you're a sheep or whether you are a goat. In the end, I believe Jesus cares most that when we look into the face of our fellow human being, we see him staring back at us. And by recognizing our Lord and King in our sister or brother, we then are motivated to love him or her unconditionally, just as God has loved us unconditionally through Jesus our King.

Thanks be to God for this opportunity to check our spiritual wellness, in order to grow stronger and healthier as disciples of our Lord and King. Amen.