

THOUGHTS ON SHEEP AND GOATS

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Parable of the sheep and goats.

Are you saved? How many of us cringe when the person on the street or even worse someone in private conversation brings up the subject. Most of us want to flee immediately. By the way, my response is, "Yes about 2000 years ago."

Believe it or not Jesus does not say that much about salvation in Matthew especially in terms of a final judgment. Today's gospel is the only time Matthew talks about the last judgment in the entire gospel. This is the last real teaching before the Last Supper at least in Matthew's gospel. Obviously Jesus draws from the book of Ezekiel that we heard this morning as well as the book of Daniel for his imagery.

Sheep and goats commonly grazed together and still do in the middle east. At night, especially and cold nights the shepherds would gather them in and separate the two. The sheep could stay outside in a pen, but the goats are not as tolerant of cold and needed to be sheltered more than the sheep. So there is some farming background that Matthew's audience would have understood.

Of great importance is to notice Jesus says all the nations are gathered, not just some but all. This is an inclusive rather than exclusive scene and important to Matthew's audience as he sought to also draw the non-Jews into the conversation.

Of great importance is to the teaching that salvation is not a quid pro quo type of deal. Neither the sheep who gain favor nor the goats who are rejected understand the sorting process. Remember in the Jewish world you did things to earn God's favor. I do this and get rewarded. The sheep are rewarded without thought for reward. God is not looking for us to rack up holy brownie points to get us into heaven.

The good acts come from a natural flow, they are in fact pure gift given without thought to what they would get in return. At pastoral care this week we were talking about the fact that we are teaching our children a theology of service as a quid pro quo relationship. I do a service project because it is required for graduation or the university requires it or it looks good on a resume. We are not teaching them service as a reflection of living a gospel life. How many of us give a gift freely without thinking what will I get in return?

There are two stories I want to use to illustrate modern day sheep and goats. I think you will be able to figure out which is which.

The first is a story that is now almost a month old. It involves a 90 year old WW2 veteran in Fort Lauderdale. This kind hearted soul has now been cited three times and summoned to court for a horrible crime. What is it? Well he feeds homeless people in a park. That is a crime in this city and in a growing number of cities. I will credit the police on the scene, they gave him the citation the last time and then let him resume feeding the people who were in line.

There is something wrong here. The ordinance was put in place because businesses in the area didn't want the homeless congregating. I guess since this is one of the spring and winter break hangouts for thousands of drunken college students they were concerned that it would be bad for business. The problem is not that they are caring for these last and least many who are homeless because there is no place other than jail for folks with mental illness, but that the city wants to try to drive the homeless somewhere else. They are not addressing the problem just trying to send it away.

Dana our deacon and Kevin her husband have been involved for several years with a program like this here in Norfolk. The Seton Outreach Van feeds homeless youth on city streets all over the five cities that make up Hampton Roads. Would we like to get them in housing, absolutely but homelessness is a much bigger problem than just a place to sleep. Sometimes the Seton van is successful in getting the youth to come in from the cold and start the healing process, but if we aren't out in these open spaces we will never find these youth.

The Episcopal cathedral in Boston started a Sunday morning breakfast and mass on the grounds of the Boston Commons in front of the church. It took the priest and the volunteers months before they could finally get the homeless who were faithfully attending to come inside. It is only in these open spaces that many feel safe. When you have regularly been robbed in a shelter setting you tend not to seek it out.

The second example comes from a blog by the poet Naomi Shihab Nye and is an article entitled Gate A-4 Live and Learn¹. She was in an airport in Albuquerque and her flight had been delayed 4 hours. Wondering around the airport to kill time she heard an announcement, "Anyone in the vicinity of Gate A-4 who speaks Arabic please come to the gate immediately." Well she did in fact speak some Arabic and A-4 was her gate.

When she got back to her gate an elderly woman in traditional Palestinian dress was crumpled on the floor and wailing. The flight attendant asked Naomi to talk to her. Speaking in Arabic that she learned as a child she was able to connect with the woman who stopped sobbing. The woman said she had a major medical procedure in Texas the next day and she thought that the flight had been cancelled. Naomi reassured her that it was only a delay and then helped her call

¹ <http://davidkanigan.com/2014/11/16/gate-a-4/>

her son who was fluent in both languages. Then figuring what the heck I've got several hours to kill she helped her call her other sons. Then they called some Palestinian poets that Naomi knew. That took care of 2 hours of the delay.

Then the woman opened her bag and took out traditional mamool cookies, filled with dates and covered with powdered sugar. She shared them around the gate and nobody refused them. Soon there was powdered sugar everywhere. Then the airline brought a cart with apple juice and shared it around.

" And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and thought, This is the world I want to live in. The shared world. Not a single person in that gate— once the crying of confusion stopped— seemed apprehensive about any other person. They took the cookies. I wanted to hug all those other women too. This can still happen anywhere. Not everything is lost."

What is heartening is that I actually had several stories to choose from to show people who are among the sheep. Just Friday on NPR there was the story of an assisted care facility that closed, but some of the residents were abandoned and had nowhere to go, Two men, the janitor and a cook stayed and cared for them, without pay and really without any ambition to become the focus of a national news story. They get it.

What if this Advent and Christmas season we actively sought out ways to help do what Jesus commands us instead of looking for excuses not to do gospel work. What if for Advent you decided to do some random acts of charity without thought for reward. What if as we walk into Advent you did these things and made sure the person who was the recipient of the gift had no idea who it was. Sort of a secret Santa, but your identity is never disclosed.

How much better a world if we reacted with unthinking generosity. How much better if we truly learned to be the sheep in this final teaching of Jesus before he is arrested, tried condemned and executed for the crime of practicing what he preached.