

November 26, 2017
Memorial Sunday
Matthew 25: 31-46
Psalm 100 – Call to worship

“Good Goats” by Julie Bergen

I'm not sure about you, but reading this passage from Matthew raises my general anxiety level. Having chosen that passage from today's lectionary on this memorial Sunday, I suppose my job today is to help relieve that anxiety, to help us all breathe more comfortably.

But if by chance you don't feel that relief immediately, let me draw your empathy to the disciples and early followers of Jesus in those early days of the church in the flux they will have felt after the energy of Jesus' passion and crucifixion and resurrection and then suddenly the ascension, leaving them in the midst of loss and confusion to trust the Spirit and their own resources to guide them in building the church. I imagine they may have felt a certain hesitation, an anxiety about how they were going to manage to get it right.

The loss that these early followers must have felt when Jesus was no longer with them, reminds us of the feelings we experience when we grieve the death of a loved one, a partner, a parent, a child, a friend. The many emotions of grief, the sorrow, loneliness, anger and abandonment stay with us for a long time and will never completely leave us. Anniversaries and times of community ritual and remembering, such as this memorial day, can make that grief fresh. The best that we can do is to sit together in that pain, to sense the movement of the Spirit in our midst, to slowly let healing and lightness come upon us, and to bring to mind memories of the people we have lost, with the intermixing of joy and sorrow.

When we contemplate death we are also led to consider life. As a Spiritual Care Provider, when I meet with an individual who is approaching death, or with their family, I attempt to draw their focus to the idea of legacy. This act of identifying and recognizing the elements that an individual considers to be their greatest accomplishment, what they leave behind, can be surprising, in the ease with which people name it, with the fact that what one person considers a legacy might appear inconsequential to another, in the way that drawing attention to this legacy can bring greater ease and acceptance of death.

The Bible offers us texts that guide us in our contemplation of the meaning of life and death, and the parable of the sheep and the goats is an example of this.

Trouble in the Text

This passage about the division of the sheep and the goats is challenging. It paints a picture of God sorting people into categories based on how they have lived their lives, those who have fulfilled their calling on one side, on the other side the people who have fallen short, have failed to leave a legacy. Perhaps this image can provide the incentive

that we sometimes need to make the right choices, to go beyond ourselves, to continue Jesus' work in the world. This is important because as Christians we are called by God to help bring about God's promised kingdom on earth. We have a role to play and this passage recognizes the effort that people make to care for others they meet as they travel through their lives.

But it may not be that easy. And for me, my curiosity is piqued especially by the question that both the sheep and the goats ask, "when did we see you?"

Clearly, neither the sheep nor the goats identify themselves as such. There is an element of surprise that suggests that the sheep do not realize that they had performed these services of caring, just as the goats do not recall walking past a person in need of care. These are hints that the moralizing gaze with which we have at times read this text lead us astray. The surprise inherent in the story refuses to acknowledge our assumption that the goats have acted brutishly and only to their own benefit, while the sheep have lived lives of gentle, subservient compassion.

An element of this text that I think contributes to its anxiety producing effect is the emphasis on works, our own efforts, in bringing about our salvation. There is long debate on how salvation becomes available to us, and recognizing our human condition, and the likelihood that we might fail even when we strive for goodness, it comes as a relief that we can accept and welcome God's grace that is freely offered. However, Matthew was unconcerned about the idea of a debate over grace versus works. Throughout the book of Matthew, Jesus instructs people to go and do, to follow his teachings, and to obey what has been commanded (28:20). This parable continues the message, emphasizing the good works of the sheep.

Trouble in the World

Personally, this passage elicits in me the desire to be a sheep, and it is there that it starts to become tricky. I want to be a sheep, I want to be seen as blessed in God's eyes. There is a risk that in my desire to do good, that there are times when my motivation is not as simple as desiring to do God's will. I would go so far as to admit that there could be ego at play, a desire to stand out as a good person. Certainly this text has been used to feed the fear of recognizing in myself the thoughtlessness and greed of a goat, and the inherent threat.

In Micah 3 the prophet calls out leaders of the church who cry "Peace", when they have something to eat, but declare war against those who put nothing into their mouths. I'm concerned about the truth in Micah's words. I worry that my desire to seek justice can so easily become lip-service, when the many tasks of life fill my time and take my energy.

And here the passage begins to turn our thinking on its head. When we are honest with ourselves, we know that none of us can always live up to the standards set out for sheep. We know that we can only be human and the Bible reminds us that the human condition includes sin. And so we are all goats, for while there are times when our choices will be to care for all people in need around us, there will also be times when we fail to see beyond our community, beyond our home, beyond our nose.

Grace in the Text

While this text may appear to contain a threat, I believe that it actually offers us relief and encouragement. As goats, we are influenced by our natural human misdemeanours. However, Matthew provides this story to illustrate what God wants of us, to do the work of caring for each other, to love our neighbour as ourself. We are being warned against selfishness and a preoccupation with our own salvation. And when we can put that aside, we are drawn into an authentic love that calls us to do the work of caring simply because we see a need. Matthew records this same message in multiple ways: we are told in Matthew 7:17-18 that good fruit will automatically grow from good trees; Jesus states in Matthew 5:13 not that we should become salt of the earth, but that we ARE salt of the earth.

Luckily for us, scripture reminds us that God is love, God has already arranged for our forgiveness and our salvation. And so while we goats can't ever truly be sheep, we are made in the image of God, created and loved by God and therefore gifted to be Good Goats. We are people who seek what is best, and when we fail, we continue to be forgiven and chosen by God.

Grace in the World

The African American Lectionary recognizes this text as ethically based, concerned with right action, rather than right belief. It states that in accepting God's grace we are compelled to look beyond ourselves and to demonstrate an ethic of love. We are reminded of the upside-down kingdom where any desire that we have to sit in a place of power and esteem will require us to enter into the life of those who are marginalized, just as was demonstrated by Jesus, who is both king and comforter.

God leads us to and meets us in every encounter. We are called to rededicate ourselves to the welfare of all people, those we meet in our daily activities, and those who are supported by organizations that seek peace and justice. Christian Peacemaker Teams who witness and support communities around the world in the face of marginalization and violence. Micah Mission and the authentic relationships that support people affected by crime. The efforts of community organizations to respond to the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The desire for justice of those involved with the Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous women. Mennonite Church Canada and its work with the LGBTQ community through the Being a Faithful Church process.

Like all things human, even in the effort to care for people, sometimes we get things wrong. Each of these projects makes mistakes, each of us in our attempts to help at times stumble on misconstrued meaning and skewed intentions. Similarly, the early church didn't always agree and at times got off track in their desire to follow Christ's example. And we are reminded that we are good goats, we won't always get it right, but regardless, we are called to authentic love.

And so we move forward, and I encourage you to do so with a full heart, recognizing God's love that surrounds you and inspires you to share that love with every person you meet and with every need you recognize.