

What Makes a Goat a Goat?

Matthew 25:31-46

November 20, 2011

Reign of Christ

‘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. 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, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. 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; 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, 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.” 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? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” 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.” 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; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 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.” 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?” 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.” And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.’

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At 8:00 in the evening on the day before Halloween in 1938, Orson Welles nearly scared the pants off of millions of American citizens when he read a version of the novel, *The War of the Worlds*, on the radio.

With almost no introduction, Welles began to read the story as if it was news. People tuning in a little late heard men speaking in grave tones about aliens landing in Trenton, New Jersey. The Martians were waging war on the human race. They left destruction and desolation in their wake. A man who sounded a lot like President Roosevelt addressed the “citizens of the nation” to urge them to carry on their responsibilities amidst this grievous attack.

As the broadcast ended, many people in New England packed up their cars and fled the area. Thousands called the radio station and the authorities. Churches filled up with people who wanted to pray. The chaos lasted for days.

The moral is that it matters if you know the genre of the story.

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Take the Sheep and the Goats. Is what I just read from Matthew’s gospel a prediction, or is it a parable? Is it intended to be descriptive about the end of the world? Or, is this another one of those stories that Jesus often uses to teach his disciples about the Kingdom of God?

Among Bible scholars, there is no shortage of debate about how to classify this piece of scripture.¹ As with all scripture, the issue is interpretation. How we choose to read this passage has bearing on our faith, the way we view God, and the way we understand time.

If Jesus’ words are meant to describe some future event, then it appears much of this life we’ve been given is about using our time preparing for the One Big Test that will come at final judgment. If they are spoken as parable, then Jesus appears to be using judgment to illustrate something about the nature of God’s kingdom that is breaking in our world.

¹ I am grateful for the work of Dr. Stan Saunders, professor of New Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary, who wrote a commentary (*Preaching the Gospel of Matthew*) and taught a class that I took on the parables.

As you might have figured out, I throw my lot in with those who read this as a parable – a parable that is grouped with three other parables that Jesus tells to his disciples just before he is led away to be crucified.

Parables are stories that disclose something that is true about the nature of God and the nature of God’s kingdom, or of God’s Dream² for the world.

Parables make us think – the genre is intended to mess with our minds – and in telling the parable of the Sheep and the Goats, Jesus succeeds at the goal.

Consider this: in the parable, what is the difference between a sheep and a goat? Confronted by the king whose job is to look back at their choices in life and separate the two, both the sheep and the goats ask the same question: “Lord, when was it that we saw you...hungry, thirsty, naked, a stranger, sick, in prison...?”

What we see is that the difference is in the motivation. As in, the sheep acted on behalf of those who are hungry, thirsty, naked, a stranger, sick, and in prison with no thought to what might be in it for them.

The goat’s question “Lord, when did we see you?” almost seems incredulous, suggesting that they *would have* taken compassion on the least of these *had they known* it was the king who was to stand before them in final judgment.

But that, of course, is not the point. The practice of compassion toward those who are vulnerable is not a means to an end. About this, the parable is clear. Sheep are not sheep simply because they are compassionate. They are sheep because they act without regard to reward.

And what will really twist your noodle is that for anyone who hears this parable about judgment – once we get the idea into our heads that there will be a great sorting out – it is now impossible not to let that inform our actions. The naiveté is gone. You can’t forget about the reward. The knowledge that our compassion toward the least and the lost will impact our standing before the King means that we cannot ever recapture the pure motives of the sheep.

² Thank you, Bishop Desmond Tutu (*God’s Dream* is a wonderful children’s book, authored by Tutu, that is appropriate for Christ the King Sunday).

So – we might ask, where are we in the equation?

We serve food to the homeless, support ministries that cloth people who are naked; we visit the sick, and give money to help with prison ministry. But is there any part of us that does all of that with an eye as to what it might gain us? Is there any part of us that does those things because we worry about what God might think about us if we don't do them? What are we – sheep, or goats?

And what about the church down the street, or the group across town, or those heartless hedge fund mangers, or those odd Occupy Wall Street protesters – are they sheep, or goats?

C'mon, Jesus! Let's just be clear about this! Who is who? Who will be on your right and who will be on your left?

And Jesus' answer is found in the muddy water of the parable – where it simply isn't clear where we, or they, or anyone is in the equation of the final judgment.

If that is frustrating to us, perhaps the question is why. Why does not knowing who is in and who is out matter? Why is it important that we have a clear sense of who is righteous and who is not? Why must we comprehend the mind of the judge?

Maybe one reason why Jesus tells this parable in such a way as to leave us unsettled about where we fit in is because we spend too much of our time and energy worrying about where we fit in.

As New Testament professor Stan Saunders says, “the parable ultimately subverts all our attempts to render the world into categories of good and bad, righteous and unrighteous, weak and powerful.”³

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And if we can't concentrate on that – on the boundaries and the distinctions that divide...us and them, sheep and goats...if we all sit in that

³ Saunders, Stan, *Preaching the Gospel of Matthew: Proclaiming God's Presence*, p. 261.

unsettled place before the king – then all that is left for us concentrate on is what the judgment of God in this parable leads us to do.

Again, Stan Saunders said, “This parable is not meant to grant certainty to any of Jesus’ disciples, but to make us watchful, attending carefully, faithfully, and creatively to Christ’s presence among the least of our brothers and sisters.”⁴

Could it be that the Kingdom of God that this parable discloses understands judgment – not as a fixed, unmovable, and eternal destination for those who fail at life’s final exam to fear – but as a gift that God uses to correct the path of who seek to follow Jesus?

Could it be, in the Kingdom of God, that the life of faith is less about chasing after an assurance of our great reward and more about a hungering and thirsting for righteousness for God’s sake?⁵

Could it be, in the Kingdom of God, that the one who is in the position to condemn us is also the one who entered the world to save us who is also the one found in the face of the person we would be least likely to expect?

I think so.

Because I do not believe these words of Jesus about the sheep and the goats are meant to be taken literally as a blueprint of some future event. I think they are meant to be read as a parable. And I notice that the words of this parable are not the last words that Jesus speaks in the gospel.

The last words Jesus speaks in the gospel are, “I am with you always...”

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⁴ ibid

⁵ ibid