

“Profiling”
Revelation 21:1-6
Matthew 25:31-46
Reverend Michael J Magee, MD
Brentwood First Presbyterian Church
1/7/07

Goats are OK

Today’s scripture is difficult to hear. Mark Twain said, "It is not what I don't understand about the Bible that bothers me. It is what I do understand!" He must have had Matthew 25 in mind, this forecast of the last judgment. Today’s scripture contains affirmation but also scary accountability.

The Apostle’s creed says **Jesus** is coming to judge. But who are **you and I** to judge or reject anyone? If we think of ourselves as better than anyone else, if we think of ourselves as sheep instead of goats, do we have the right vision? Aren’t we all complex? Doesn’t Apostle Paul say that all have fallen short of the Glory of God? And is Jesus’ final judgment condemnation or mercy?

A mother was driving her car on the interstate. Her 2 year old son was a passenger. An 18 wheeler suddenly pulls in front of her. She says “TURKEY.” We have all said this. Some of us have even said worse things. Her son asks, “Mom OK?” Mom says, “Yes, Mom OK.” Then her son asks, “Turkey OK?”

And what about those goats? Goats were not really considered such bad creatures in Jesus’ day. Sure, the Hebrew word for goat, *hez*, is derived from the word which means “to be strong.” Sure, they were destructive to areas where the farmers tried to grow crops. Sure, their temper and aggressiveness required the shepherd to keep close watch over the mixed flocks so the sheep would not be harmed. But the sheep and goats were separated at the end of the day not because one breed was good and the other useless, but because the sheep preferred the cold fresh air at night, and the goats warmth. Like the sheep, goats were widespread and valuable in Palestine. Neither the Hebrew word for “flock” nor the Hebrew word for “herder” distinguishes between sheep and goat flocks and herders. Of Jacob’s gift of 530 animals to Esau, 220 were goats. Goats were tamed 9000 years ago, and kept mainly for their milk. However, goat meat was permitted by Leviticus, and kid meat was highly prized. Their wool was used to make garments, tents, and twine. The curtains of the Tabernacle were made of goat hair, for heaven’s sake. Goatskins were used to store wine, oil, water, and milk. Goats, like sheep, were considered an acceptable sacrifice, and goats were used on the Jewish “Day of Atonement” to carry away the sins of the community as a “scapegoat.”

Our culture recreated the world in such a way, that we reject the useless - what we see as useless. But all of us have been written off. You have yourselves

been written off. You can walk into a room of people all of whom know who you are, and immediately tell who has written you off. Who has written you off and to whom you are still of value. Those who have written you off will not look at you. Those to whom you have value immediately engage you with their eyes. Those we reject, those who we look through and do not see, are those whom Jesus wants as the foundation stone of his new creation. The foundation stone of this new creation who trust in Jesus are the poor, the weak, the old, the little. The invisible. The ones we in our ignorance call the goats.

You and I are so busy sorting the sheep and the goats we accidentally mix angels with the goats. And the sad thing is, only Jesus' sorting makes any difference. What a waste of time, all the judging and sorting we do! Think of what a different place the world would be if instead of you and me spending so much energy condemning other people, if instead our judgment was mercy? If we saw everyone as "us" instead of as "them." Regardless of their faith tradition. Regardless of their creeds. Regardless of their deeds. It is not what we don't understand about the Bible that bothers us. It is what we do understand!

Jesus calls us to Compassion

I watched Peanut's Christmas again last week. Snoopy is sitting in the doorway of his dog house shivering violently during a winter storm. Charlie Brown and Lucy are walking by – all bundled up and warm as toast. They offer a greeting, "Be of good cheer Snoopy," Charlie Brown says. "Yes, be of good cheer," Lucy replies. And they keep on walking as Snoopy sits there with chattering teeth.

Members of the same family may look different. There are, however, some identifying marks of authentic Christian people. Near the top of the list of those characteristics is compassion.

Compassion lies at the heart of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. The lesson from Matthew today tells just how central compassion is in the eyes of Jesus.

We in Brentwood usually connect with the poor in only two ways: television and statistics. This sort of connection might give us concern, that is, recognition that there is a problem. So we recognize abstractly the names of places like Darfur and Rwanda, events like the Tsunami and Katrina, places like Abu Graib and Guantanamo. But compassion is something different than concern. It is a feeling of relationship. Up close and personal. Our relationship with Jesus is sometimes like this. We have concern for Jesus. We may see him from a distance, or we may find him fascinating. But what would it mean to see Jesus through the eyes of compassion?

When Martin of Tours, a Roman soldier and a Christian, met an unclothed man freezing in the cold, he stopped and cut his coat in two and gave half to the stranger. That night he dreamt he saw a heavenly court with Jesus robed in a tattered coat. One of the angels present asked, "Master, why do you wear that battered old coat?" Jesus replied, "My friend Martin gave it to me."

Jesus is hidden

Almost all of us have had the experience at one time or another of going incognito. That is, we have pretended that we were someone else. The first time we did this was when we dressed up for Halloween. Do you remember when we dressed up as Disney movie and cartoon characters? Or devils or witches? We may have just pulled an paper sack over our heads and went to the neighbor's house and said, "trick or treat." The neighbor then played the game and responded, "Whose little kid are you?" Do you remember? Those were the first times that we went incognito. Some of us look forward to doing this again next October.

I have a lot of admiration for policemen. One of my sons wants to be a policeman. Sometimes policemen go incognito. They grow their beards and hair. With long, shaggy hair and a long shaggy beard they wear a natural mask. Their true identity covered up. They looked sort of like goats. If people knew the policemen's true identity, they would treat them differently.

In today's scripture, Jesus talks about going through the world incognito himself.

The disciples asked Jesus, "What is it going to be like at the end of the world?" Jesus replied, "I will tell you a story. It will be like this. There will be a king up in heaven and all the people of the earth will gather around him, and this king will divide the people into the sheep and the goats." Jesus continued, "The sheep will be on the right, and the king will say to them, 'Come into my party. I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you clothed me. I was in prison and you visited me.'" They said, "When did we ever do these things for you?" The king replied, "Whenever you did these things for the littlest people, you did them for me." Then the king addressed the goats on the left. "Depart from me. I was starving and you gave me no food. I was thirsty and you gave me no drink. I was a stranger and you did not welcome me. I was lacking clothing and you did not cloth me. I was in prison and you did not visit me." They said, "Lord, if we only would have known it was you, we would have treated you differently. If we only had known your true identity, it would have made all the difference. If we had only known it was your face behind the face of the refugees; if we had only known it was your body in the infirmary; if we had only known it was your body starving in Africa; if we had only known it was you, it would have made all the difference. Why if we had known it were you, we would have done something! If

we had known this were a matter of importance, a tribute for a king; if we had known that we might receive a plaque on the wall, we surely would have acted!" Isn't that how it is with us too? The Lord said, "Depart from me."

God who created the universe, and who raised Jesus of Nazareth from the dead, is a God who hides himself. God in Jesus goes incognito.

But the real point is not that Jesus is hidden. The real lesson of this parable today is an invitation for you and me to seek Jesus. To seek Jesus where Jesus is the most difficult to find. Not just in the beauty of the sunsets or the birth of babies or the bounty of nature. Not just to find Jesus in such obvious places. The real lesson of this parable is to seek Jesus where Jesus is to be found hiding behind the faces and places of suffering people. Yes, Jesus is hidden in the water of Baptism and the cup and bread, but the main place Jesus is hidden is in the cross. Jesus crucified. Where Jesus is crucified, Jesus is the most hidden.

When we think of Jesus crucified, we are reminded of the needs of the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned. Even if we have never seen many of these people face to face, we know of them. Names like Darfur and Rwanda, words like Tsunami and Katrina, places like Abu Graib and Guantanamo are known to all of us. Perhaps the tragedies are not worse in our time than they have been in ages past, but we are confronted with them more visually today because of television and documentaries. Who are these people? What do they want from us? They want to be our friends.

Today's scripture tells us that these people are Jesus, and what we do to them, we do to him. Jesus tells us that what we do to the 32,000 children who die from starvation each day in our world, we do to Jesus. What a horrible reality! .We are overwhelmed like a deer in the head light. Maybe even like a goat in the head light.

Jesus calls us to embrace suffering

There was a man who you have heard of. His name was Francis of Assisi, a man who was riding high in life. Francis was feeling very good and very confident, but underneath it all, he was also feeling very empty. As he was riding along on his horse one day, he stopped and there was a beggar at his feet. Francis looked down at the beggar and the beggar had leprosy. His body was filled with open sores and wounds from the leprosy. Francis looked down, got down from his horse, bent down and picked up the man and looked into the man's face. He then did something unusual. Francis put his arms around the beggar, put his face against the open wounds, and hugged the man. Francis embraced him, and then pulled his head away, and he looked into the face of Jesus. A revolutionary change occurred in his life. This story is an invitation for us to reach out and to hug, embrace, pull close into us, those who are hurting in

the world. This story is an invitation for us to embrace a suffering humanity, just as Francis did, just as Jesus did.

In contrast to all of this were the self-righteous Pharisees. The Pharisees were willing to look for God in the most obvious places. They go to church. They see God in the beauty of the sunset, in the face of a beautiful baby, in the bounty and fullness of nature. The Pharisees see God in the obvious places. But they are unwilling to go to a soup kitchen. They are unwilling to teach vacation Bible school. They are unwilling to visit people in the hospital, or in the nursing home. Can't you hear those Pharisees? "I work all day. I am at work at seven in the morning and get home at seven at night. I am so exhausted. I go to church on Sunday morning, meetings at church, and Bible study. I am so busy with church activities. Besides if all those poor people showed some initiative, they would be all right. They need to pull themselves up by the bootstraps and solve their own problems." For a whole variety of reasons, the Pharisees never go to the soup kitchen, never visit the hospital or prison, never visit the nursing home, never teach VBS, never tithe. Never. Jesus says, "Depart."

We know what Jesus asks us to do. "It is not what I don't understand about the Bible that bothers me. It is what I do understand!" But the thought of embracing a suffering world is overwhelming. So we need help.

Love comes from Jesus

There is another clue to understanding this story. Can we put ourselves in the place of Jesus? And if we can, which Jesus? Jesus the judge, or Jesus the hungry, homeless, and imprisoned. We don't want to be hungry, so we put ourselves in the place of Jesus the judge. It feels good to say "yes" or "no," "thumbs up" or "thumbs down," sorting the sheep and goats. But making ourselves the judge does not embrace a suffering world, does it?

We need love to embrace a suffering world. And Mother Therese says it is not enough to say, "I love God. " She says we also have to love our neighbor. She says the Gospels tell us we are liars if we say we love God and don't love our neighbor. How can we love God whom we cannot see, if we do not love our neighbor whom we see, touch, and with whom we live? We realize that love, to be true, has to hurt. We must be willing to give until it hurts. Otherwise, it is not true love. It hurt Jesus to love us. He humbled himself even to the cross. Scripture tells us we are here so we ourselves can "put on Christ." Jesus makes himself the hungry one, the naked one, the homeless one, the unwanted one. So we can see Christ in the other, and also be Christ to the other. Loving and giving until it hurts.

The poor, the weak, the physically and mentally handicapped people, they are all crying out for love. They are all saying, "Do you want to be my friend?"

Just as Jesus is saying, "Do you want to be my friend?" How can we give them enough love?

We look for the love of Jesus inside of us. We cannot be this kind of loving person unless we find the love of Jesus living within us. It is not you. It is not me. It is the love of Jesus living inside of us. We can't embrace suffering people unless the love of Jesus lives within us.

It begins at home, in the unconscious acts of generosity to your spouse and family. You don't even realize you are doing it. The parents are at the hospital for weeks, taking care of their sick child, as were many other parents caring for their children. You say to these parents, "You are loving your son in a special way." They reply, "What is wrong with you. We are doing what any loving parent would do." They don't even realize the good that they are doing. The same is true for someone who cares for her mother at the nursing home. You think nothing of it, except that it is a lot of work and that is the way that love works. You don't have to go to Guatemala to find a ministry; you might go no further than your own bedroom and kitchen table. What I am suggesting is that this quality of love begins at home with these unconscious acts of generosity.

This kind of love then spreads out from your home. To the neighbor down the street and the man who had a stroke. To a person who had a car accident and for some reason, you become involved.

This love spreads. You begin to realize that your brothers and sisters in Africa or Asia or Central America or in downtown Nashville are hungry and starving. Of course you reach out to them. Why? You don't know. Your brother is starving. Your sister is starving. Of course, you reach out to help. You are family. The love of God living inside of you begins to reach out to all kinds of people and you don't even know it.

Because the whole of the mystery of Jesus is to bring people together. The work of evil is to divide, to put barriers up between people, to create a world where there are good people and bad people, and where you and I judge and where you and I condemn.

Jesus says in the Gospel of Luke: "Be compassionate as the Father is compassionate. Don't judge and you won't be judged, don't condemn and you won't be condemned, forgive and you'll be forgiven, give and in the measure that you give you will receive." That's the complete message of Jesus. "Love your enemies." And he goes on...It's easy to love those in the same club. It's easy to love those that love you. It's easy to lend to someone when you know that if you're in need they'll lend to you. But Jesus says,, "Love your enemies." That's to say, love those who in some way are a threat to you.

Jesus' forgiveness calls us to forgive others

Charles Dickens' short story, *A Christmas Carol*, is a classic. Three ghosts visit Scrooge on Christmas Eve, challenging him to think of what he has done and what lies in store for him. With the final ghost, Scrooge realizes what his life has been like and begs for another opportunity. He repents of his failures, having heard the judgment against him, and is given a second chance.

The New Year is traditionally a time for reflection. Paul says we all fall short. So like Scrooge, we ask for a second chance, even though the clock has already struck midnight.

Eli Wiesel gives his own interpretation of what happened in the lives of Cain and Abel in his book, *Messengers of God*. In a sense, the two represent the two groups, the goats and the sheep. Cain desperately wants to talk to someone, to try to understand his distance from God, to have a brother who really cares. But Abel is too busy with his own acceptance, his reverie in piety. He has no time. It's a common theme in the parables of Jesus. There are always those who don't care about the other and have to bear some responsibility for driving the brother or sister to actions we find it all too easy to judge. Wiesel says that the Cains of the world become what they are because of us—because we had no time to listen, to understand, to reconcile, to negotiate, to appeal.

We ignore people because we too have our burdens. We reject pleas for help and understanding because we don't recognize the rights and the dignity of others. We go to war all too quickly because we think that bombs and bullets can silence alienation rather than the quiet striving for brotherhood and justice.

When Jesus our judge separates the sheep from the goats, you discover that some of those among the goats are people you have known. They are brothers and sisters, friends and relatives, colleagues and clients whom you at times listened to, but did not really hear. Their plights were sometimes visible, but you were too busy. They had real needs but so did you. Desperate, they found themselves doing what they should not have done. Troubled, you wonder what you could have done differently. "Who will go to them?," you now ask Jesus the judge. Can you really imagine Jesus saying, "It is too late, their opportunity is past?"

You, the self-proclaimed sheep, look across the chasm at the goats, wondering what can be done. Then you go Jesus, and you say to the judge. "You cannot leave them where they are." Remembering that Jesus himself had taught you to think like this, he cannot ignore you. Something about forgiving 70 times 7. So he enters the valley of the shadow, and climbs Golgotha's hill to rescue those who really do belong to the all inclusive flock of sheep and goats. Jesus becomes the shepherd who won't give up, the shepherd king with holes in his hands and a crown of thorns on his head. It is a lowly and dirty job, but he will never give up in his quest to seek and to save the lost, to find those hidden in cardboard houses

and prisons. It is the other side of his role as judge of the world, the role of the searching shepherd whose claim on us is shaped by love.

This is the remarkable thing that happens to people. People like you and me, when we recognize that though we have all too often failed to be what God called us to be, Jesus never stops reaching out. We are loved though we are unlovable. We are empowered although we lack the will. We are sent out to others even though we are preoccupied with ourselves. We are loved into loving and freed into freeing. "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away."

Conclusion

Television and statistics. Turkey OK and Mom OK. Jesus the judge and Jesus incognito. Francis of Assisi and Mother Therese. Scrooge and second chances.

When we look back on last year, upon our missed opportunities and failures, we celebrate the goat's second chance. "You go," Jesus tells us. "You go claim them for me. You are my hands and voice and love in this world." And just as he pleads with us, we plead for those others who have often lost their way because of us. "We have to go now, Lord. Send us. Empower us. Give us the joy and the courage to love others as if they were you."

Let us pray: "Lord, may your love control my thoughts and actions that I may do what is pleasing to you. Show me where I lack charity, mercy, and forgiveness toward my neighbor. And help me to be generous in giving to others what you have so generously given to me. Amen."