

FIRST LESSON: Ezekiel 34:20-24  
SECOND LESSON: Matthew 25:31-46  
November 26, 2023

## **“Sheepish”**

Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

A sheep farmer was out tending to his flock when a man rolled up in a brand new Jaguar, carefully stepped out adjusting his Versace suit, strolled over and said, “Hey, a buddy of mine and I have a bet. If I tell you exactly how many sheep you have, can I take one?” The farmer nodded, so he went back to his car and pulled out his laptop, opened it up and called up some satellite photos, ran some algorithms, and announced, “You have 1,432 sheep.”

Impressed, the farmer said, “You're right. Go ahead and take one.” So the man loaded one of the animals into the backseat of his car.

“Now,” said the farmer, “I'll bet all my sheep against your car that I can tell you what you do for a living.”

Confident that the farmer wouldn't know he said, “Sure.”

“You're a politician,” said the farmer.

“Wow!” said the man. “How'd you know?”

“Well,” said the farmer, “you come from nowhere even though I never asked you to. You drive a flash car and wear a smart suit. You told me something I already knew. And you don't know anything about my business. Now give me back my dog.”

The prophet Ezekiel knew a bit more about sheep than that, but he just used them as an illustration. Ezekiel wrote about fat sheep and thin sheep. God promises to judge between the two, because the fat sheep “shove with flank and shoulder” and butt all the weak sheep with their horns, driving them away from good grazing land and safety. The fat sheep are in it for themselves. The fat sheep are out for their own political and material advantage. But God says, “I will save my flock, and they will no longer be plundered.”

Even in a non-agrarian setting we can recognize the “fat sheep,” only we sometimes call them “fat cats.” They are the people with power and money who use their privilege for their own advancement and pleasure. They either don't see the need around them, or deliberately ignore it. They show a total disregard for those who are weak or living in poverty. They build highways right through the middle of the towns of the weak, further fracturing and destroying their communities. They build factories that pollute water, air and land in the poor areas, choosing places where the residents do not have the voice or power to oppose them. They pollute the drinking water of people in poor areas in order to save money. They are the multinational companies who exploit poor nations because these nations lack protections for their environment and their

workers. There have always been fat sheep who take advantage of the lean, today as much as at any other time. **And God takes note.**

Ezekiel's passage is messianic in nature. King David lived centuries before these words were written. In the covenant that God established with David God promised, "Your throne shall be established forever." (2 Samuel 7:16). The new David Ezekiel prophesies about "who will be a prince among them," is the Messiah.

Matthew's gospel contains the story of sheep and goats. In this case God separates animals once again, though not between fat and thin but between goats and sheep. In both Old and New Testament there are victims and aggressors, and God identifies with those who suffer, not those who exploit. Judgment restores things to the way they should be.

There is nothing understated or tentative about Jesus' words found in Matthew. Jesus was fond of using the title "Son of Man" to describe himself. It comes from the book of Daniel. It sounds humble to us, but it is really a mysterious title of glory and power. Jesus said, "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left." Jesus put himself on a par with God who judges. Jesus is the Messiah who will save the flock.

I preached on sheep and goats not *too* long ago. I'm not sure if you all remember all the fascinating things I learned about them, but I do! From our modern perspective we can't figure out how anyone would have trouble separating sheep and goats. They look VERY different, right? But our sheep are the result of a pattern of breeding that is very much NOT to the advantage of the sheep. Sheep have been domesticated for about 10,000 years, but the earlier sheep would grow fleece in the winter and shed it in the summer. Today's sheep do not shed. They MUST be shorn once or twice a year, otherwise their fleece will grow so large and heavy that it will literally kill them. Today's fluffy sheep are a genetic aberration of our making. But THESE 1<sup>st</sup> century sheep and goats looked almost identical, because the fleece was much more modest in size and dependent upon the time of the year. A person had to be really up close and personal to tell the difference between a sheep and a goat. But there was one surefire way to tell the difference: behavior.

Sheep follow a shepherd. They are very social animals. They have relationships. They have best friends. Sheep can remember up to 50 faces. While sheep can stray, they are most often found together in flocks. And a shepherd can LEAD a flock of sheep. Sheep recognize their shepherd's voice and will only follow their own shepherd.

Goats are the ADHD little boys of the animal world. Goats climb. Goats escape. Goats will try to eat almost anything, especially that which you do not want them to eat. People use goats today to get rid of poison ivy, but they also love your prized roses. A shepherd would not dream of expecting a herd of goats to follow him. They would be off in a million different directions at once. Goats need to be herded from behind, carefully. And fences for goats have to be

very, very high, because they are escape artists. Sheep, more often than not, listen. Goats are born with Oppositional Defiant Disorder.

In any community people can look very similar to one another. But God knows the heart. God knows who the sheep are and who the goats are. And the evidence is found in what they do. The sheep feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked and visit the sick and prisoners. Prisoners at the time were people awaiting trial, and there was no provision made for them. It was generally the responsibility of family and friends to provide basic necessities while the person was in jail, so a person with no visitors was in a terrible situation. But the “sheep” don’t do any of these things because they are consciously thinking that they need to cross them off their list. They do them because it is simply the right thing to do.

In Jesus’ parable the king invites those on his right hand, the sheep, to claim their inheritance, saying, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.”

The sheep were confused, asking, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?”

And the king replied, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’

These people who Jesus described as both “sheep” and the “righteous” were completely unaware that they were doing anything unusual. Mercy and compassion were a way of life. To NOT help those in need would have been unthinkable.

On Thanksgiving this year Michael was with us with his adopted boys, and he told us that it was exactly 25 years since he met the Farrell family. Michael stumbled upon Penn Wynne Church one Sunday morning in a pretty desperate situation. He was very young and very alone having fled to America from Russia seeking asylum. The Catholic Church did let him sleep in their basement for a short period of time, but all of the clergy he met basically said, “Well God bless you. You chose this path. Good luck.” He found work doing live-in childcare in the neighborhood, but that quickly deteriorated as the family went away and literally locked him in so he couldn’t escape when they were away. By then he’d been coming to church for a short while, and people from this congregation actually helped him escape. I dread to think what would have happened had there been a fire. He then lived with the Umlaufs for a few months before ending up living with my parents for years. There he was able to be the kid he still was, while trying to live as an adult. Michael lived with my parents as he went to college, drove my mother crazy by keeping ferrets in his bedroom, graduated, got a good job and his own place to live and eventually established his own business. And he passed on the gift that was given to him, getting his adopted brother to the United States first and then by giving a loving home to three boys who needed one. My parents and people from this

church didn't do all of this to get extra credit from God. They did it because it was the right thing to do. To open the door to someone in need is a decision, just as closing the door in the face of someone in need is a decision. And yes it is generally messy and inconvenient, especially when it comes to pet ferrets, but it is also a glorious part of God's plan.

The "goats" in Jesus' story also had no idea that they failed. And this is a bit terrifying, because people can do all kinds of "religious" things, but if they completely fail in mercy and compassion, it's all superficial. Jesus said a good tree bears good fruit and a bad tree bad fruit. We can be fooled by these people. People can fool themselves with a form of religion that is based on status and ritual. **But God is never fooled.**

Most often when we think of sin we think of sins of commission. These are the sins of omission. It is the help we should have given, the loving support we should have offered, the time should have spent listening to someone when we rushed away because we had other things to do. Even when our connection to God is real there are times when our response to need will be less than perfect. We all suffer from short tempers, frustration, cynicism and selfishness. But the Holy Spirit keeps nudging us towards grace—grace for ourselves and grace for others. Wherever we are in life there will be people around us who need help. And yes, there are also those out there ready to con and use soft-hearted Christians. We can help them too. We can help by not being manipulated and calling them on it. But when things are in doubt it is always better to err on the side of grace. We will not be judged for helping someone who doesn't really need it, but we will for turning our back on those who do. Amen.

Ezekiel 34:20-24

<sup>20</sup> "Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says to them: See, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. <sup>21</sup> Because you shove with flank and shoulder, butting all the weak sheep with your horns until you have driven them away, <sup>22</sup> I will save my flock, and they will no longer be plundered. I will judge between one sheep and another. <sup>23</sup> I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. <sup>24</sup> I the Lord will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the Lord have spoken.

Matthew 25:31-46

<sup>31</sup> "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. <sup>32</sup> All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. <sup>33</sup> He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

<sup>34</sup> "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.' <sup>35</sup> For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I

was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, <sup>36</sup> I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

<sup>37</sup> "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? <sup>38</sup> When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? <sup>39</sup> When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

<sup>40</sup> "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

<sup>41</sup> "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. <sup>42</sup> For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, <sup>43</sup> I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'

<sup>44</sup> "They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'

<sup>45</sup> "He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'

<sup>46</sup> "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."