

FIRST LESSON: Ezekiel 34: 11-16; 20-22
SECOND LESSON: Matthew 25: 31-46
November 22, 2020

“What Has Jesus Got Against Goats?”

Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

As serious as this passage is, the first thing that comes to my mind is of course, what has Jesus got against goats? Goats are very useful creatures! There was a sign in my neighborhood before the election that said, “Goats 2020, because humans s—k.” Goats are very useful creatures. They produce milk. You can even make goat cheese. But a little bit of historical research was very helpful, because in fact Jesus had nothing against goats. He was just using a common practice as an illustration.

Goats and sheep were most often herded together in Israel, because the land was rarely good enough to support a single species. Goats could tackle the hard ground and eat things sheep cannot. If you’ve ever checked out YouTube videos of goats you will be amazed at their climbing abilities. Sheep need more level ground and lots of grass. Too many of either species can destroy a pasture. A herd of about two sheep for every three goats is good, although it can often be higher on the goat side in practice because goats breed a lot faster than sheep. In order to keep the balance, shepherds routinely cull the male kids (baby goats). You may remember in the parable of the prodigal the older brother complained that the father had not even given him a young goat so he could feast with his friends. This is what he was talking about. This separation of animals and culling was a normal and recognizable part of life, which is why Jesus used the image. Any herder knows how to separate sheep and goats, and males and females. Apologies to all those baby boy goats out there who got the raw end of the deal.

The problem is not being a sheep or a goat. The problem is behavior. And Ezekiel illustrates this very well. God says, “See, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you shove with flank and shoulder, butting all the weak sheep with your horns until you have driven them away, I will save my flock, and they will no longer be plundered. I will judge between one sheep and another.” According to God it is the way we treat one another that matters. Do we abuse and oppress the weak, or seek to protect them?

One of the downsides of the Darwinist ideology that has infiltrated so much of American thought is the glorification of the survival of the fittest. If a small business dies because of the pandemic, too bad. If a larger business survives because it swallows up smaller ones and takes undue advantage—good for it. I remember having a disturbing conversation with a Christian (not a member of this congregation) who even thought that we should have let the whole auto industry go bankrupt and not rescue them back in 2008, despite the massive suffering and poverty that would have resulted. But nowhere, in the Old or New Testaments, does scripture endorse a survival of the fittest

ethic. Hard work, honesty and integrity, yes. Throwing the poor to the wolves, no.

Having said all that, there are two ways to look at this parable, which is actually not so much a parable as it is a picture of the end times. The first approach is the one we are most familiar with. The “least of these” are the poor and needy, the sheep are Christians, or at least those Christians who are living up to their faith, and the goats are non-Christians and/or people who claim to be Christians but are hypocrites. The problem is that this interpretation has only been around since the mid-19th century. Prior to that what struck people was the fact that Jesus is the one who was “hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison,” as and Christians we are identified with Jesus. WE are those in need. Jesus said, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’ It is the Christians who are the ones in such dire need, and those who help them are outsiders who God will reward. Now that turns things upside down, doesn’t it?

Since Jesus’ teachings and parables are always multi-layered, I’m inclined to say that the right interpretation is probably both/and, not either/or. All “nations” or *ethne*, means everyone, not just the Jews, and not just Christians. It does seem at least possible that those who have never heard of Christ and who do not have the law will be judged according to their mercy towards others. Non-Christians who act to save Christians who are being persecuted will be blessed by God. Gentiles who saved Jews during the Holocaust were doing God’s work. Works of mercy are always godly.

Each of the needs Jesus named cover basic areas of life in the 1st century. and if we are hearing this word correctly, we can either be the one in need of help, or the one giving the help. All of these categories have correlations today. Hunger is met with food and thirst with drink. A nation that cuts off food aid to the poor and gives more money to the rich will be judged by God. This is not a matter of politics. It’s a matter of morality. As Americans we tend to blame poor people for being poor, but God understands the true complexity of the situations people face. It is not an even playing field. We do not all start out life at the same place. If someone is hungry, we are to feed them. If there are ways to help them on their feet so they will eventually be able to meet their own needs, we should do that. But we also need to recognize that some people suffer from severe conditions that make that impossible. We are to still care for them even if that care has no end in sight. The needs of a severely disabled child or adult will not change.

In God’s kingdom the stranger is to be welcomed. The stranger is the immigrant and the refugee! Protecting our borders from drugs is one thing. But turning our backs on devastating human need and suffering is another. Most of us in this congregation don’t know what it is like to live in a foreign land. I do, and in Scotland in the late 1970s and 1980s I didn’t face the immigration issues that people in the United States face today. But I still remember the aloneness in the early days, despite the fact that *theoretically speaking*, I spoke the same language. And I will **never forget** the kindness of those who helped me.

Jesus said the naked are to be clothed, the sick visited, those in prison visited and cared for. These are practical needs. Clothing was expensive in the 1st century. If a person owned two sets they were doing well. The sick were completely vulnerable and dependent on others. And prison in those days was for those awaiting trial. Prisoners only survived because people brought them food. Mercy is practical. It is also not limited to these illustrations. I know I have received many kinds of mercy in my life, and tried to give mercy to others. Mercy listens. Mercy cares. Mercy is prepared to be inconvenienced.

In Jesus' story those who showed mercy had no idea they had done it. This is not unusual. Over ten years ago I reconnected with a woman named Julie Herd when I was asked to do her father's funeral. I remembered her. Julie had defended me from severe bullying in 9th grade. She was a large girl, and she put herself out there intimidating and sending fleeing those who were tormenting me. **I never forgot it. She didn't remember it.** For Julie it was just what she did. Used to being abused herself because she was half Arab she fought for the underdog. A few years ago, Julie died of cancer, and I did her funeral service. Who knew that the two of us would come full circle in such a way? When I spoke, I told her family what Julie had done for me.

I will never forget the kindness of a woman named Fiona Borland in Glasgow, Scotland. We lived below the poverty level. I had a toddler and a baby on the way. A group of moms in the tenement flats around me had taken me in, and every week we would go to the local indoor pool with our children where they had a special children's pool, extra warm and only 4 feet deep. And every week Fiona would make sure she was standing in front of me in line and paid my way in. I did not even have the 35 pence required, and somehow Fiona knew it. We never said anything. I'd be willing to bet that Fiona Borland doesn't even remember my name so many years later. **But I will never forget her.** Mercy doesn't have to be given in huge extravagant doses. It is the small things that add up. Our lives should be lived in such a way that we don't even know that what we have done is right because doing what is right is as natural as breathing to us.

In Genesis Cain asks God, "Am I my brother's keeper?" The answer is, YES. Jesus says we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. There are no "buts" or "ifs". We are not allowed to decide to turn our backs on people in need because we don't like them or we think they are unworthy. Imagine if a child of ours was facing deadly peril and bystanders who could have acted to save her life simply chose not to do so because they didn't like the way she looked or didn't feel like it. That's God's perspective. We are all God's children. Failure to do good and to care for one another is damning. Whatever we do, or don't do, for the least of these, we do, or don't do, for Jesus. Amen.

Ezekiel 34: 11-16; 20-22

¹¹ "For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. ¹² As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. ¹³ I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will

bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. ¹⁴ I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. ¹⁵ I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign Lord. ¹⁶ I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice. ²⁰ “Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says to them: See, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. ²¹ Because you shove with flank and shoulder, butting all the weak sheep with your horns until you have driven them away, ²² I will save my flock, and they will no longer be plundered. I will judge between one sheep and another.

Matthew 25: 31-46

³¹ “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. ³² 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. ³³ He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. ³⁴ “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. ³⁵ 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, ³⁶ 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.’ ³⁷ “Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ ⁴⁰ “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.’ ⁴¹ “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. ⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ 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.’ ⁴⁴ “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?’ ⁴⁵ “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.’ ⁴⁶ “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”