

Matthew 25:31-46

The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats

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*Title Slide (during scripture reading)

*Mother Teresa, known in the Catholic church as Saint Teresa of Calcutta, devoted her life to caring for people who were sick and poor. She was born in Macedonia to parents of Albanian-descent and taught in India for 17 years. Her order established a hospice, a leper colony and centers that continue to care for people who are blind, elderly, and differently abled. In 1979 she received the Nobel Peace Prize for her humanitarian work. I heard Mother Teresa speak about today's text many times. It was no secret that it was her favorite. She lived her life as if this passage was the light for her path. She once wrote, "When Christ said, 'I was hungry and you fed me,' he didn't mean only hunger for bread and for food; he also meant hunger to be loved." When she preached on it, she would hold up her hand and with the five fingers extended she would say these five words while closing each finger: "You-did-it-to-me."

There is no shortage of brilliant, faithful people who have been especially drawn to this text. Thomas Merton, a theologian and American Trappist monk, reflected on this passage in his meditation, "The Time of the End is the Time of No Room."

He wrote, "Into this world, this demented inn, in which there is absolutely no room for him at all, Christ comes uninvited. But because he cannot be at home in it, because he is out of place in it, and yet he must be in it, his place is with those others for whom there is no room. His place is with those who do not belong, who are rejected by power because they are regarded as weak, those who are discredited, who are denied the status of persons, tortured, exterminated, with those for

whom there is no room, Christ is present in this world. He is mysteriously present in those for whom there seems to be nothing but the world at its worst.”

*This beloved story, The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, (which is really more like a vision) is a description of what the author believed would happen when Jesus returns. Because of the apocalyptic nature of the text, my favorite scholars think it’s a mistake for us to assume this story is original to Jesus. But I don’t think that is a reason not to take this text seriously. Our faith is what it is because of communities like Matthew’s original audience and many others through the years. Besides, this story forces us to think about what we believe about ideas around one of my least favorite “church-y” words, *salvation*.

Historically, the bottom line for many Christian traditions has been that a person’s salvation is dependent on what they believe about Jesus. The most widely accepted doctrine of salvation is one in which the church has said that a person is *saved* if they confess Jesus as their “personal Lord and Savior.” One text that seems to support this teaching is in the Gospel of John, in which the author tells us that Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life...Nobody gets to the Father, except through me.” You may have noticed that our story from Matthew doesn’t say any of that. This is the only text in the New Testament that gives specific details about “the last judgment,” yet the standard of judgment is not confession of faith in Christ.

“Nothing is said of grace, justification, or the forgiveness of sins. What counts, according to this passage, is whether or not one has acted with loving care for people in need. Such deeds are not a matter of “extra credit” but constitute the decisive criterion for judgment.”

(Boring and Craddock, *The People’s New Testament Commentary*, p. 94)

Clearly, the authors of Matthew and John were not in the same church small group!

Truthfully, if I gave everyone in this room a pen and paper and asked each of you to write down what salvation is, I bet I would get as many different answers as there are people in this room, including, "I don't need to be saved from a God who loves me." The same is true for biblical scholars. They don't all agree. Author and New Testament scholar, Dr. Amy-Jill Levine, in her book, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus*, wrote a little story which highlights this.

"After a long and happy life, I find myself at the pearly gates. Standing there is St. Peter. This truly is heaven, for finally my academic questions will receive answers. I immediately begin the questions that have been plaguing me for half a century: "Can you speak Greek? Where did you go when you wandered off in the middle of Acts? How was the incident between you and Paul in Antioch resolved? What happened to your wife?"

Peter looks at me with some bemusement and states, "Look, lady, I've got a whole line of saved people to process. Pick up your harp and slippers here, and get the wings and halo at the next table. We'll talk after dinner."

As I float off, I hear, behind me, a man trying to gain Peter's attention. He has located a "red letter Bible," which is a text in which the words of Jesus are printed in red letters. This is heaven, and all sorts of sacred art and Scriptures, from the Bha-ga-vad Gita to the Qur'an, are easily available (missing, however, was the Reader's Digest Condensed Version). The fellow has his Bible open to John 14, and he is frenetically pointing at v. 6: "Jesus says here, in red letters, that he is the way. I've seen this woman on television (actually, she's thinner in person). She's not Christian; she's not baptized - she shouldn't be here!"

"Oy," says Peter, "another one - wait here."

He returns a few minutes later with a man about five foot three with dark hair and eyes. I notice immediately that he has holes in his wrists, for when the empire executes an individual, the circumstances of that death cannot be forgotten.

“What is it, my son?” he asks.

The man, obviously nonplussed, sputters, “I don’t mean to be rude, but didn’t you say that no one comes to the Father except through you?” “Well,” responds Jesus, “John does have me saying this.” (Waiting in line, a few other biblical scholars who overhear this conversation sigh at Jesus’s phrasing; a number of them remain convinced that Jesus said no such thing. They’ll have to make the inquiry on their own time.) “But if you flip back to the Gospel of Matthew, which does come first in the canon, you’ll notice in chapter 25, at the judgment of the sheep and the goats, that I am not interested in those who say ‘Lord, Lord,’ but in those who do their best to live a righteous life: feeding the hungry, visiting people in prison . . . ”

Becoming almost apoplectic, the man interrupts, “But, but, that’s works righteousness. You’re saying she’s earned her way into heaven?”

“No,” replies Jesus, “I am not saying that at all. I am saying that I am the way, not you, not your church, not your reading of John’s Gospel, and not the claim of any individual Christian or any particular congregation. I am making the determination, and it is by my grace that anyone gets in, including you. Do you want to argue?”

The last thing I recall seeing, before picking up my heavenly accessories, is Jesus handing the poor man a Kleenex to help get the log out of his eye.”

(Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus*, p. 92)

“I am the way, not you, not your church, not your reading of John’s Gospel, and not the claim of any individual Christian or any particular congregation.” It is easy to read today’s story, or any other text in the Bible, and miss the point or even disagree about the point. We can imagine the sheep and goats being separated. And of course, as we imagine it, we see ourselves as sheep and “the others” as goats. We are saved, right? But this is where it’s confusing because the text tells us that Jesus aligns himself with “the others.” The one who sits “on the throne of his glory” and has the power to separate the sheep from the goats is also the one who lends his identity to “the least of these.” Perhaps our identity, like Jesus’, is a little more complex, more fluid, than we would like to think. Maybe we are only sheep sometimes and we are goats other times. Because of that, maybe we shouldn’t assume too much about ourselves and our location in the text.

If we continue on in Matthew, we will see that Jesus’ location in the larger story changes drastically. Today’s text is the very last story in Matthew before the events of Jesus’ last week begin to unfold. Set in that context, elements of today’s story foreshadow things to come in the passion and resurrection narratives.

“I was hungry,” takes us to the final moments Jesus spent with his friends around the Passover table where their physical hunger was met and they were reminded of the Israelites’ liberation by God from slavery in Egypt.

“I was thirsty,” has a parallel in the moment when, in the midst of his suffering on the cross, Jesus was offered “wine mixed with gall.”

“I was a stranger,” reminds us of Peter’s words of denial, “I do not know the man.”

“I was naked,” recalls the moment when the soldiers stripped Jesus of clothes, giving him a robe which they used to mock him as “King of the Jews.”

“I was sick,” while on the cross,” Jesus cried with a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?””

“I was imprisoned,” Jesus was bound and handed over to Pilate.

“What you do for and to the least of these---the immigrant, the child, the felon, the transgender person, the Muslim, the black man, the politician, you do to me. Literally to me,” Matthew’s Jesus says. This text challenges us to think of salvation not as something we achieve, but as something we discover, often when we least expect it. The sheep in this story were surprised to learn they had cared for the King as they cared for their neighbors. The goats were surprised they had missed the chance to show love to the King. Certainly, had they known he was the right there, they would have done things differently, right?

While I am not a subscriber to the “Jesus as personal Lord and Savior” way of thinking about my faith, I do believe God cares deeply for each one of us personally. God wants to save us. God wants to save us through love that doesn’t quit, go away, or give up. God wants to save us by helping us truly see our neighbors who need us, who were created in the image of God. God wants to save us from selfish obsession by helping us create loving communities in which to belong. God wants to save us by teaching us that to deeply love one another is to truly live. May we love deeply, may we all know what it is to be safe. Amen.