

Sermon: When Was It?

New North Church, Hingham

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26 November 2017

Based on **Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24, Matthew 25:31-46**

Last week, we said that understanding the Gospel's social setting is important because it affects how we hear the parable. Back in May, we mentioned how in the nineteenth century a group of Christian missionaries brought the Gospel to non-Christians living somewhere deep in Africa. The group receiving the good news struggled with the recurring theme of a shepherd in Scripture. They asked, 'Why does it have to be sheep? They're a nuisance and eat all the grass. Why can't it be about goats?' Their social setting didn't match up with the Bible's, so the missionaries had to engage in some creative re-interpretations. And today, of course, we get both sheep and goats.

But it doesn't have to be sheep and goats – it could be any two opposites, like Red Sox and Yankees fans, or people who like bacon and people who don't.

The Bible often pairs the image of a shepherd with that of a king, as Matthew and Ezekiel do today, because the imagery often overlaps. In Matthew, Jesus is a little indirect, but Ezekiel comes right out and says it:

'For thus says the Lord God:

I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out.'

Shepherd imagery is often used as a metaphor for religious leadership, I suppose because of the care they ought to provide. Wil Gafney, a Bible scholar and theologian, wrote that the shepherd in Psalm 23 is a comforting presence *precisely* because he 'is armed to the teeth, a rod in one hand and a staff in the other.'¹ Part of being a shepherd includes having the ability to respond appropriately to any situation, either with violence or nurturing, as needed; sort of a cross between Friar Tuck and a Trappist monk.

There is no poll or survey of which I am aware, but my unscientific guess is, most people would rather be a sheep than a goat in this situation. Because they follow the shepherd, those called righteous in the metaphor must be sheep, not because they follow blindly but because they follow faithfully and willingly.

Just as last week's reluctant servant failed to serve his master, so too do today's goats stand in judgement for not serving their neighbors. So: sheep are righteous, goats accursed. But notice that both the sheep and the goats ask the same question: '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?' They're not quite sure they know what he's talking about.

And of course, Jesus isn't talking about things done or not done to him or for him specifically, but to 'the least of these who are members of my family.' And again, in Matthew, we come back around to wondering, who among us belongs to Jesus' family? But we already know from the second verse that Jesus' family includes 'all the nations, gathered before him.'

So, somehow, the righteous just *know* how they should treat people, even the unrighteous, while the accursed simply have no clue. And not only do the righteous know, they *do*.

Which, when you think about it, is some kind of skill, whether it's learned behavior or something we're born just knowing. It is my conviction that we are all born kind. We all start out as gentle, loving creatures. Little kids always seem willing to help other little kids.

And then, somewhere along the way, sometimes things change. We all end up on our own path in life and it's not always the one we thought we would be walking. And if we ever get to the point where we ask ourselves, 'How did I get here?' it makes me wonder if it was by choice or by circumstance. How does a five-year old white boy become a racist? Just as we're taught how to ride a bicycle, we're also taught, by observation or by instruction, how to relate to those around us, and not always in a positive way.

These are extremely difficult lessons to unlearn. But anything is possible.

Jesus himself tell us it's never too late, that judgment will arrive when 'the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him' and not before. The challenge buried in the parable might be for us to see that Jesus stands with the needy, with all those who seem to lack God's grace and favor, and to also see that Jesus is waiting for us to remember our own need for God's grace.

God sees what we often refuse to see. Ezekiel insists that God will always seek us out, and not always the other way around, and I can attest to that in how my own life path twisted and turned for me to come to this place and this moment.

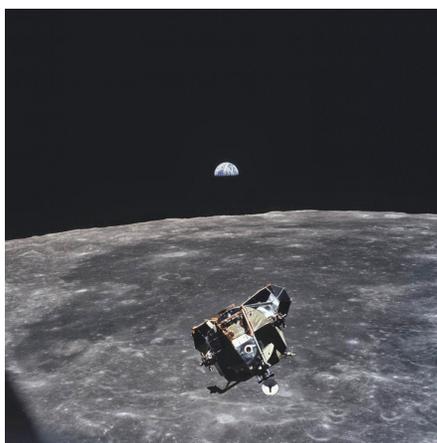
This is the language we hear in Ezekiel: ‘For thus says the Lord God: I myself will *search* for my sheep, and will *seek them out*; I will *rescue* them; I will *bring them out* from the peoples and *gather* them from the countries; I will *feed* them with good pasture; I will *seek the lost, bring back the strayed, bind up the injured, strengthen* the weak; and will *feed them with justice.*’

God has no desire to throw us into the outer darkness. God loves us and wants us to see the world as God sees it, all the time.

In 1969, Michael Collins served as command module pilot for Apollo 11. While Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin traveled to the moon’s surface in the lunar module, Collins waited on board for 21 and a half hours. As the command module drifted behind the moon, cutting off communication with Earth, he wrote:

“I am alone now, truly alone, and absolutely isolated from any known life. I am it. If a count were taken, the score would be three billion plus two over on the other side of the moon, and one plus God knows what on this side.”²

While Armstrong and Aldrin descended to the lunar surface, Collins took a photo through the command module window. In the frame were the lunar lander in the foreground above the moon, and Earth in the far distance, the big blue marble, all of it. Excluding Collins himself, that photograph included every person either living or dead – all the nations, gathered before him. And yet, in that time when he was on the dark side of the moon, cut off and alone, he felt absolutely isolated from any known life.



The righteous are gathered from ‘all the nations’ – anyone can qualify. All are invited. Not all choose to join. But from God’s point of view, there is nowhere we can go where God can’t seek us out. We are all in the family photo.

The Old Ship Church traditionally hosts a Thanksgiving Eve interfaith service. This year, my first, we counted 19 different participants representing 10 different faith traditions plus several chaplains serving in non-church settings. It was a good time and a good service, with good music and good singing. You couldn’t have asked for a more relaxed group of people. In a stress-free environment, we can more easily reflect on what truly matters, especially as we ease into a new church season.

What truly matters, above all else, is worshipping God and serving our neighbors, wherever they happen to live.

And as we reflect on how simple yet difficult that may be, we might more easily hear the words of Jesus in all their power: “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, [...] 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’” (Matthew 25:31, 34).

May it be so.

¹ Wil Gafney, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 314-315.

² <https://www.space.com/16971-michael-collins-apollo-11.html>, accessed 24 November 2017.