

Sermon: Seven Works of Mercy

New North Church, Hingham

Rev. Steven M. Aucella

26 November 2023

Based on **Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Matthew 25:31-36**

You've heard the expression, 'if you want a thing done well, do it yourself.' The passage from Ezekiel suggests that God said it first. God said, "I will" about eighteen times in this reading, sometimes adding the emphasis of "I *myself* will" and then goes and does it.

In Ezekiel, God the shepherd also acts as the judge, doing what he says he will do, but in Matthew, it seems as if this responsibility will be given over to Jesus, the Son of Man, when he returns in his glory. That's one connection between the two.

God also said, "I will seek out my sheep; I will rescue them; I *myself* will be the shepherd of my sheep." We heard all of the ways in which God will protect and nurture the flock. But which of those sheep? God is clear on this: the fat and the strong got that way by being bullies, and God will feed them justice. Great metaphor.

The passage might also bring to mind this verse from Psalm 23: 'I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; *thy rod and thy staff* they comfort me.' We've said it before: this shepherd brings comfort and security because he's armed to the teeth. That's what you want in any responsible shepherd.

Matthew also gives us shepherd imagery. At the beginning, Jesus says '*when* the Son of Man comes in his glory,' he will separate the flock.

The Book of Daniel refers to 'one like a Son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven' (7:13) and in that vision, the Son of Man is probably the angel Michael, Israel's guardian, so there is a Hebrew tradition surrounding that phrase and title. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus refers to himself as the Son of Man.

Then, in verse 34 – *then* Jesus starts talking about what the *king* will do, and we'll get to that.

So, the king is a shepherd, and the shepherd is a king. But what kind of king? The king is a righteous judge who is humble and who himself is judged on the Cross.

We don't seem to have those kinds of leaders anymore, at least not any who are kings. We have trouble finding shepherds we can trust too.

We have no problem finding goats and separating them from the sheep though.

In just one example, there's a local sports team out there having a miserable season after experiencing years of astounding success. They're finding out difficult it is to build an offense around one guy who can get the job done consistently. In that, they're like any other team from the past twenty years. One GOAT left and now all we are left with are some goats.

Think about it: sportswriters might make good shepherds. In Jesus' time, sheep and goats were kept together for grazing and the shepherd cared for both. It was customary to separate them at night. A good sportswriter could do that.

As a church, we support several outreach ministries. But we cannot help everyone. People sometimes call here looking for financial help and it's hard to tell if they're scamming us or not, and it's equally hard to turn them away.

But those are cold calls. Churches get them all the time and the protocol is to refer people to those organizations that provide the services that can actually help people. The scammers will hang up.

It's different when you meet someone face to face. At the Hingham Food Pantry, they have one rule: if you come into the pantry and ask for food, you get food.

Jesus said, 'Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' He didn't specify any criterion other than 'the least of these,' the weak and the vulnerable. We are called to not ignore or overlook the needy, and to do what we can to help. Do we see Jesus Christ in the face of the hungry? Do we give of ourselves in love in his name?

The Gospel passage consists of two sections. The first is sort of a parable about the final judgement at the End Times, which is when we can expect to see the Son of Man in his glory.

The second section is a summary of Jesus' ministry and final judgement. Recall that the Passion story is about to begin, and there are hints of it here, as Jesus declares his identification with those who suffer, in a series of mercies that apply to him too.

But let's back up to when Jesus said 'all the nations' (ἔθνη) will be gathered before the Son of Man. 'All the nations' is a context thing. Earlier in Matthew, it meant only Gentiles, basically meaning all foreigners. Or it could mean just Gentile Christians. Jewish Christians too, if you're feeling generous: Matthew's church included both. Usually, 'nation' meant those people who practiced similar customs or shared a common culture. Most likely, at this point in the story, Jesus meant every nation, every person.

If it applies to all nations, then we are saved (or not) by how we treat others, and that leads to grace. But where does that leave repentance? Repentance must count for something. Well, when we repent, we are committing ourselves – or *recommitting* ourselves – to living in a certain way, according to God's will, and by doing that, we are naturally led to treating others well, to loving our neighbors as we love ourselves, and as we would want to be treated. And that is justice.

But what if 'all the nations' means only Jewish Christians? Or only Gentile Christians? Then judgement becomes an Us-or-Them situation. Because if we exclude some classes of people based on some made-up criteria, then we can't help them.

Here is what the shepherd-king will do: he will judge his own domain and he will separate the flock. We can choose to be on one side or the other by our actions in the here and now.

There is nothing social, political, economic, or even religious in this passage, which only appears in Matthew.

It's personal.

God wants us to help build a world based on the values taught to us by Jesus.

We are called to live in community, to care for one another, and, if any slip and run into trouble, God calls us to help lift them up. That's what Jesus' ministry was about: to go and do exactly that.

God wants us to live an authentic, fully rounded life. And with that life, God wants us to love and to care for our neighbors, to see – actually *see* – who needs us, and to help them.

Amen.

* * * * *