

**May 24, 2017**  
**Matthew 25.31-46**  
**Benjamin A. Loven**

How did you hear our Bible story this morning?

Did you hear it as a warning?

As motivation to change your life?

As a road map for living?

*All of these are typical ways to hear this Parable of the Sheep and the Goats.*

After all, Jesus sets up a contrast.

From a young age, we've been trained to listen for contrasts and to choose wisely between the two options.

If I tell my kids to do something, often it won't happen on the first try. But if I give them choices, like, "Do you want to brush your teeth, or take a timeout," it's amazing how well they respond!

Jesus presents us with a contrast. The sheep, the righteous, get the kingdom of heaven and eternal life.

The goats, the accursed, get eternal fire and punishment.

And since our ears are trained to hear this system of reward and punishment, we listen to this story trying to figure out how to get rewarded.

We hear: feed the hungry, satisfy the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, heal the sick, visit the imprisoned...or else...

So that's it. The sheep did these things, the goats didn't, ergo the sheep get the reward and the goats get the punishment.

...*Except*, our story isn't quite this simplistic.

Yes, it'd be nice if, for *once*, Jesus would make it easy for us, but that's not his style.

So let's listen again: "Then the king will say to the sheep, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink,' [and so forth]. Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?"

After being told that they're going to the kingdom, how did the sheep respond?

“*When was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty, a stranger or naked, sick or in prison?*”

The sheep *had no clue!* “*When was it that we saw you...?*”

They didn't realize that they were *actually* serving God; they just thought they were helping people in need!

Likewise, the goats *had no clue* that by ignoring the people around them they were *actually* ignoring God.

Because if they *knew* that they were ignoring *God*, they totally would have made an effort!

They *wouldn't* have walked past that hungry person on Broadway, or ignored that sick person in St. Mary's, or stared suspiciously at that stranger wandering around lost in the subway of the Gonda building.

If they *knew* that by serving the people around them they were *actually* serving *God*, they *absolutely* would have helped.

...and *that's* Jesus' point. He's poking our motivation; he's prodding what's in our hearts.

Are we really, truly *servicing* someone if we're doing it to gain eternal life?

Are we actually *caring* for someone if we're doing it to avoid eternal fire?

The sheep served the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick, and imprisoned simply because they were in need, without any thought as to how it could benefit them in the future.

But here's where it gets tricky for *us*: we *know*, because we've now read this story, that by serving these people in need we are *actually* serving God...and by simply *knowing* this, it colors our motivation.

Because we *also* know that if we *don't* serve them, then we are behaving like goats, and we know where *that* ends up.

So, by serving these people, are we doing it simply because they are in need, or because we want to avoid being goats?

And the *real* trouble is, we don't know how to answer this question!

We can't truthfully answer whether we're doing it because the people are in need, or because we don't want to be goats.

It could be either...or a maybe bit of both...

Which is why we need to forget how we've been trained to listen.

You see, we're only in this pickle because we've been listening for rewards and punishments, but that system breaks down when God gets involved.

We need to listen to this story with different ears.

So what do we hear? "Then the king will say to the sheep, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom...*prepared for you from the foundation of the world...*'"

*Before* the sheep helped anyone, God prepared the kingdom for them.

*Before* they had a chance to do anything, God prepared the kingdom for them.

*Before* they had a chance to choose between eternal rewards and eternal punishments, God prepared the kingdom for them.

Why? Because God loved them.

That's it. God loved them and gave them life in the kingdom. And in that life, they served the neediest around them, simply because they needed help.

In this parable, Jesus doesn't tell us what we *must* to do to be rewarded with eternal life; rather, he describes what life looks like in the kingdom.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, I can't make you to do anything. I can't make you serve the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned.

I can't make you welcome the immigrant, pray with the Muslim, visit the murderer, heal the terminally ill, sit with the vet suffering from PTSD.

In other words, I can't make you a sheep. That's not how it works; *we* don't get to *choose* to be sheep....

*But, I can* remind you of the life you have been given in Christ.

I *can* remind you that God claimed you in the water of baptism as daughters and sons, washing away your sin forever.

I *can* remind you that in Holy Communion Jesus gives you himself, fully and completely.

I *can* remind you that Jesus died and rose for you.

And I *can* remind you that *God loves you*, no matter what, wool and horns  
and all.