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Matthew 25:31-46

## WHEN DID WE SEE YOU?

People love to hear stories. Stories capture our attention and engage us. That is why one of Jesus' favorite ways of teaching was to tell stories. These made up stories were called parables and they were very effective, and still are, in delivering a message about God, and who God calls us to be, and how God calls us to behave.

The parable we read today is sometimes called the parable of the Great Judgment or the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats. Jesus tells this story to reveal something about how God judges people and their lives.

Now, religiously observant people throughout history have often been very judgmental people—often judging the way other people do and do not measure up to the standards of their faith, judging who is “good” and who is “bad.” Even today, one of the biggest complaints people have about Christians is that they are so judgmental.

And notice what is often the focus of religious judgement against other people. People are often judged for certain kinds of behaviors: sexual behaviors, addictions, stealing, and so forth. People are also judged based simply on who they are—their identity—things like their social status, education, race, income level, sexual orientation or gender identity.

But of all the standard issues that religious people can get all bent out of shape about, none of those make it into Jesus' story about God's judgment. Instead Jesus highlights something else as the greatest source of God's judgment of the peoples of the world. What is the issue that people are judged for in this story? (**responses**) *(how they do/do not respond to the*

*vulnerable, people in need, the powerless, those facing hardships, those in danger, those in despair).*

The king in the story judges the peoples for what they did or did not do for what he calls “one of the least of these who are members of my family.” Who are among the “least of these” listed in the parable? **(responses)** (*hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, imprisoned, stranger*).

Now, let’s think about who those groups might be in our world today. Who are the hungry in our world today? **(responses)** (*children growing up without healthy nutrition, food deserts, clients of UPC’s food pantry*) Who is suffering thirst in our world today? **(responses)** (*people living through droughts*). Who might be the naked in our world today? **(response)** (*those left homeless after a natural disaster*). Who might be considered the stranger? (*immigrants, migrants, anyone different from us because of race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity*).

In the parable, those who receive the king’s praise are those who responded to others in need or distress or hardship. The king praises those who offered compassion and care. And compassion and care are much more than simply being friendly or pleasant. Compassion involves action, assisting, responding, alleviating need.

If we took just one of those categories—let’s take the welcoming of the stranger—what might that look like to welcome the stranger? **(responses)** (*addressing racism—people cannot feel welcome in a racist society, ensuring people have housing, good education, employment*).

We can see that there are many ways to fulfill the call to welcome the stranger and some of those involve not simply how we treat others as individuals but how we respond as a community—as a church, for example, or as a society—the kinds of policies and laws, systems, and structures we have in place to assist people. How we welcome the stranger will be one of the ways God will judge us as individuals, as a church, as a society.

The parable speaks about the “least of these” using fairly broad categories: the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick, etc. What is the problem that comes from using such broad and general categories: **(response)** (*general categories are hard to relate to*)

Each person in such a category is a real human being, with a name, a life story, hopes and dreams, fears and joys. Every migrant on that ship that sank in the Mediterranean was a real human being—a particular human being. But we can more easily dismiss them and ignore them as particular people when they are just lumped into such categories: migrants. We might see them with our eyes but we don’t necessarily see them with our hearts.

Think about how differently might we respond to the general category of “the stranger,” for example, if that stranger were suddenly a particular individual. Maybe the stranger is an immigrant student who arrives in your school speaking very little English. Or it’s your nephew who gets sent to prison. Or the natural disaster wiped out the houses in your sister’s town. Or it was the arson attack against another Presbyterian Church—as in the one that took place in Douglas, Arizona. In such cases, the general, universal category of “someone in need” becomes particular. And that particularity *can* move us to act and respond with compassion.

This is what Jesus does for us through his parable. Jesus takes those broad generalized categories—the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the imprisoned, the sick, the stranger—and offers himself as the particular. The king says in the parable, “Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” When you see them, Jesus says, you see me. When you do it to them, you do it to me. What that means for us is that the people in those big categories, the “least of these,” are not nameless, faceless, meaningless individuals. They are Jesus.

That is the very nature of God's love, right? God's love is not just a general abstract love. God's love was made particular in the person of Jesus. When we see Jesus, we see God's love for us.

Way back in the beginning of Matthew's gospel, the angel tells Jesus' father Joseph that Jesus is to be called *Emmanuel*. Does anyone remember what *Emmanuel* means? (**responses**) (*God with us*) God is with us. This parable today teaches us that Jesus, Emmanuel, identifies with the least and forgotten, the vulnerable and the powerless. God is with them.

And God is with us whenever *we* are made vulnerable by life: by sickness or hardship, by loss and grief, by mistakes we have made, by things we deeply regret. Sometimes we can be counted among "the least of these." But God sees the particularity of you and responds to you. Emmanuel is with us.

And maybe we can recall how in our time of need, other people were with us as well. Other people cared for us, or reached out to us with compassion, or supported us, or forgave us for that big mistake, or visited us, and saw us and the particularity of us. They were God-with-us. They were the sheep from the parable—the righteous ones who saw us in our need and responded with compassion.

Today's parable *is* a story about judgment. And as a judgment story, it invites us to a time of reckoning. Will we be counted among the sheep or the goats? Will we see the forsaken, vulnerable, powerless peoples of the earth not only with our eyes but with our hearts? Will we act with compassion and respond to help? Will we demand that our communities and our society be rooted in similar values and priorities?

And here is the good news for all of us as we take this internal reckoning of ourselves and our lives. Here is the good news: through God's love, even goats can become sheep.