

“HOW GREAT IS OUR GOD”

Based on Matthew

25: 31-46

I'll never forget the look of disbelief on my father's face. We were visiting my Aunt Freda, who had always a barn full of goats. Some of us rather thought they were strange pets, but she just loved the frisky, saucy animals. They even helped pay their way for a while, as an artisan cheese maker purchased their milk, to make 'fancy feta's' for high end restaurants. But I will never forget the day that dad's freshly washed car became home base to about thirty goats playing 'king of the castle'. They were on the hood, the trunk, leaving their 'mark' shall we say on the wheels. The most ambitious of the bunch were on the car roof. Dad's eyes got wider and wider, yet social niceties did not allow him to explode in front of my Aunt. So, he sat and suffered. Let's just say for what Dad did not say in the house, he made up for, on the car ride home!

At first glance, being a goat sounds like so much more fun. What do sheep do? Eat. Bleat. Huddle. Goats run and frolic, kick up their heels with little thought or consequence; the world by the tail, that is, if a goat really did have a tail. Of course, Christ was not really talking about sheep or goats at

all. Look at the placement of this passage within the Gospel of Mathew.

This is the last chapter, before

This is the last chapter, before the final journey to Jerusalem. On this, the last Sunday of the Christian year, in the last section of the last chapter which shares the ministry and teachings of Jesus, Christ looks everyone straight in the eye and says, 'There will come a day. There will be a moment of reckoning. There will be a time when your life, your work and your faith are examined before God, and you will be held accountable. Some will be motioned to the right, some to the left. There will be no other choice. When your moment arrives, will you be sent to the right, or will you be sent to the left. Are you a sheep or are you a goat?

It is a sobering question. It should be a humbling question that strikes deeply within the soul of each of us. And let's face it, who wants to look at those deeply penetrating faith questions when Christmas is around the corner, and your mind is full of Black Friday specials and the Christmas open house you are planning to attend this afternoon. Can't we leave the difficult questions until the New Year when things settle down? To which Christ replies, "Is not this question,

the most important one in all of eternity?"

For some, the moment of their salvation affirms for them, their place among the sheep. The hard work has been done, and any 'sheeply' or perhaps odd moment of bad goat behavior is irrelevant, because a defined moment of salvation or return to the Lord has swept the past clean. Case closed and completed.

For others, this passage is rather like a check-list of 'Good Christian vs Not-So-Good Christian' activities. Get enough check marks on the 'Good Christian' side, and off with the sheep and eternity you go. We Presbyterians can get stuck in this one fairly easily. We are people who bind faith and good work so tightly together sometimes, that the lines get blurred. We get busy doing 'good things' that we forget to make sure our faith is 'doing good' as well; that our reason for doing 'good' things, is because of 'good' faith.

But I wonder if Christ wanted a little more from us in this discussion. Four times, a set of situations is presented to us:

I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' (v35-36)

Those on Christ's right queried, "Jesus, we don't remember doing these things." Christ replied, "When you helped one, someone, anyone, other than yourself, you were a reflection of Me."

Then those on Christ's left said, "But what about us, Lord? Didn't we do these things too?" Christ replied, "When you did something, if you did anything at all, you didn't do it as a reflection of Me. You did it for yourself. Now move to the left."

Like I said earlier. Sobering. Because for as much as I would like to pat myself on the back, me being a preacher and all, and say 'Well done, Teresa. You're a good sheep!' I don't have to think too hard to find some rather bad goat behavior or thoughts, times where I did 'good things' but my heart was not in the right place. I could put quite a few checkmarks on a list if asked. But that is not what Christ is asking.

"Look around you," Christ says. "See the people. Listen to their worries. Shake up your complacency and look at what I am showing you. Help where you can. Pray where you can't. And don't do it because, 'that's what a good Christian does.' Do it because your heart begs you to take a step forward and offer to help in some way. This is not a contest, so see who gets the most check marks by the time you are presented before your Saviour. It is a challenge to see if you are willing to listen to the whispers of your heart, because those whispers are Me."

Next Sunday, we begin again, the journey towards Bethlehem. Our days will be filled with activities, carols, parties and memories. But as we come to the close of yet another year, I remind you. You are here, in this world, the hands and feet of Christ in this world, living out your faith each day,

working at tasks on His behalf. There is time. There is time to consider whether you see yourself as a sheep or a goat. There is time to consider which side of the Saviour you would like to be motioned to. There is time to reconsider what you do for the Lord, or perhaps the harder question, why you do it. There is still time, to feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, visit the sick, pray for the imprisoned. Even in this busy season, there is time. Our God is a great God, and He has given us time. So take some time. Now. Because the scriptures are clear. There will come a day. And when that day arrives, may the King say to you:

Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. (v34)

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