

POWER TO CHANGE

June 30, 2018

Pentecost 4

[Matthew 25:31-36](#)

(prayer)

The twenty-fifth chapter of the book of Matthew is - in my mind - one of the most powerful collections of teachings of Jesus in the gospels.

Matthew 25 contains three *stories*:

1. The parable of the ten bridesmaids - half of whom missed out on a wedding reception because they didn't plan ahead by bringing enough lamp oil for the evening.
2. The parable of the talents - three servants were entrusted with managing their master's money while he was away. Two of them invested the money and showed impressive profits, while the third took no risks and only had the principle to return to the boss. AND
3. The parable of the sheep and goats, that we heard today.

Each of these are rich stories that Jesus uses to give his disciples a glimpse into the mind of God.

I regret that I am able to preach on only one of them today. And... there are so many *tangents* I won't have time *to go out on* relating to the one I am preaching on.

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Last week, we spent some time exploring the Jesus teaching story told in Luke, chapter ten: commonly called The Parable of the Good Samaritan.

It was a moral tale that forced a reluctant 'teacher of the law' to admit that the call to *love God with our whole being* and to *love our neighbour as ourself* was not an intellectual or attitudinal matter of the head and heart, but a matter of actual actions.

Actions will define faithfulness, not heritage.

Don't brag me about it, just show me!

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Jesus' point was.... that being judged as *less-than-worthy* by some standard of the religious authority is less important than making the good choice to be a loving neighbour.

The *implied* message of Jesus' story was that God is happier with an unrighteous person who *lives out love* than any number of righteous persons who choose to *hold back love's potential*.

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If Jesus only "implies" that *actions defines faith more than words or status* in Luke, chapter 10, all ambiguity is gone in the parable we heard from Matthew 25.

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The metaphoric setting of Jesus' story is that of court proceeding: a king sitting in judgement over the people of all nations.

Within this metaphor, Jesus briefly adds a second metaphor: a shepherd who has a mixed flock of sheep and goats. Out in the fields, as they are grazing, the two types of animals intermingle.

Jesus' audience knew that there would be times when the shepherd needs to divide them up in species groups (maybe some of the animals are being sold).

Everyone in Jesus' audience would know that the task of figuring out which animal goes into which group is very easy. Even a novice shepherd can tell a sheep from a goat, even if their coats

were similar colours.

It might be hard work to corral each animal, but you wouldn't confuse a goat with a sheep.

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The inner metaphor serves the purpose of telling the audience that they should not try to argue whether the right animal was in the right pen. They knew from daily, practical living that telling sheep from goats is easy.

This is not the ending of the movie version of the musical [Hair](#) when George Berger is mistaken for Claude Bukowski and tragically ends up in a group of soldiers being deployed to Viet Nam because to the officer, all grunts in olive greens look the same.

Before Jesus continues with the court proceeding part of the parable, he wants to make it clear that debating who is in which group is irrelevant.

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If you are already familiar with the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew, you would have probably noticed that (for the reading today) I only chose half of the parable... stopping at verse 36.

I was not trying to avoid the last half of the parable, although it is not as positive as part one. The second half really says the same thing as the first half, but comes at the point from the opposite direction.

It *is* nicer to hear about the *better* part of humanity.

Even so, the point can really get driven home when we consider humanity's less noble virtues in comparison.

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In the full text of Mt25, Jesus doesn't pull any punches.

Everyone will be brought before the seat of judgment. They will be divided into two groups. To one group, the judge will say: "I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.

You are judged to be "righteous."

As a result, I share all that I have with you. Come with me. Enjoy.

You will always be safe with me."

To the other group, the judge said

"I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.

You are judged as "unrighteous".

Because of that, I have nothing for you.

Go away.

I won't protect you anymore."

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This is not just any run-of-the-mill day in court.

The Son of Man is sitting in judgement over "the nations": adjudicating the level of righteousness of each person's life.

The scene that Jesus presents is not their trials, but their sentencing.

The trials have already happened, and they were open and shut cases. Even the most inexperienced of judges could separate the law-abiding from the lawless. *It's as easy*, Jesus says, *as separating sheep from goats.*

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That is as far as the inner metaphor goes.

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Sheep don't choose to be sheep.

It is in their DNA.

They're born that way.

Sheep are sheep and goats are goats by nature.

It would be nothing short of the animal version of racism to base judgement on "who they are".

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Remembering that the sheep-goat language was the metaphor within the metaphor. In Jesus' broader story, it is not a god-given nature that is the basis for the division, but it was certain actions of the nations' people that determined their status.

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The goat-sheep metaphor breaks down there. In a *real* pasture, you don't get to choose; you are either a goat or a sheep. You have always been a goat or sheep.

To understand Jesus' message, we need to move beyond the metaphor, by accepting that "[the people] of the nations" have control over whether they will be metaphoric sheep or goats. "**We**" decide through our choices.

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A really interesting part of the parable - to me - is that neither group seems to have known how they measured up within the criteria for the dividing. They both question the judge's wisdom.

People in the group on the right (the so-called *sheep*) said: "Thank you, but you've made a mistake, I never did any of those nice things to you. I probably would have, but I didn't. I don't deserve the blessing."

The *goats* in the left-hand group said the same thing (in a defensive way): "Wait a minute, you've got the wrong person. I never ignored you. I would never ignore *you*... you're the king. Why would I ignore the king? I didn't ignore the king, so, I should get a blessing, too. Can I go stand with them?"

A characteristic of the goats is that they are very *inward looking*. They have a "what's in it for me attitude?".

A characteristic of the sheeps is that they are *outward focused*. "What does the 'other' need that I can supply?".

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It would be naïve of me to ignore that one of the purposes of the author of Matthew including this unique story in the text is to motivate the readers to make more compassionate choices moving forward. If doing the right thing for righteous reasons isn't enough of a draw, maybe you'll be do it to earn the good favour of God, or... at least to avoid being *left behind* to suffer in a unquenchable fire.

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Wow, it is hard to preach on Matthew 25, without going full [Kirk Cameron](#).

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It is so simple to limit God to being the doler of mindless judgment: to make people question whether they are checking off enough boxes in the tally of good works, to have the divine algorithm sort them into the sheep list in the end.

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A lot of preachers think that they can *win souls for Jesus* by scaring people into righteous actions. “Even if you really don't *want* to feed the hungry and visit the prisoners, you'd better suck it up and do it any way... or else you will end up burning in the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”

The fire and brimstone type of sermon is such a copout. ***That's why*** I only asked Marion to read verses 31 to 36.

The threat of punishment distracts from the true centre of Jesus' teaching in this passage.

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In fact, I would argue that we are both sheep and goats. We have our selfless and selfish sides. Depending on the circumstances, at any given time, we can find ourselves in either group.

More on that later.

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One of the interesting story-points that this parable is... that all of the people before the judge limit their understanding to a *literal* interpretation of the judge's words.

Everyone misses the point.

- *When did I help “you”?*
- *When did I ignore “you”?*

The implication of these questions is: *I promise, if I saw “you” in need, I would be there for you.*

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One summer during my university years, I worked as a waiter at a Mexican food restaurant chain.

Every once and a while, a “spy” from the company would come in an pose as a regular diner.

Unbeknownst to use, they were judging us on how we met certain service standards, like: how long did they wait before the hostess showed them to the table, were the menus put on the table in the corporately-approved way; how quickly, the staff brought them the complementary tortilla chips and salsa (no more than 60 secs from sit down was the expectation); did I (as a waiter) suggest a specific drink in my first visit from the table: “can get you a strawberry margarita or maybe a cold bottle of dos equips beer?”

There was a long list of expectations that got posted on a big white board every time one of these quality control visits reports came in. “The board” didn't just list which standards were met, it named names. Who was the hostess, the wait staff; who bussed the table? Did the manger make an appearance in the dining room close enough to the spy's table for them to read their name tag.

And these hidden evaluators were notorious for trying to trip us up with odd requests, etc.

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We lived in fear of seeing our name on that board: because everyone knew that even the best and most conscientious employee missed the mark here and there.

And we all had excuses when our judgment was laid bear before everyone. *That was the night when the kitchen ran out of re-fried beans... or I had a bad headache that day... or I remember that shift, I was perfect, this report is wrong!*

Sure, maybe the threat of being caught in this sting operation motivated a few employees to be a little less lazy, but most of us were (by nature) pretty customer oriented, any way. After all, we had chosen a job, where we could earn double our minimum wage paycheque through the tips, we earned. I could measure how effective of waiter I was *in real time*, by the weight of my pockets at the end of the night.

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This “Chi Chi's waiter experience” is my personal parable that argues against an overly literal interpretation Matthew 25, especially focusing on the reward-punishment aspect.

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But, there is marvelous twist in the story...
The "Son of Man" is not the true judge in the story.
We are.

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"We" are the judges.
"We" are queens-kings of our own destiny.
"We" decide who is worthy of our mercy and compassion.

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In spite of the literal words used in the parable, we are **not** welcomed into the loving presence of God (or banished from God) at the "end of time"... we are enveloped within the presence of God **in this life**, every we see the god-given worthiness of someone in need of care and compassion.

Actually, I take that back, the parable actually does *literally* say we are in the presence of god in this life.

*As you did it to one of the least of these,
you did it to me.*

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A few chapters earlier in Matthew, Jesus put it this way;
Where two or three are gathered, I am there.
(Mt18:20)

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By ignoring or avoiding the opportunities to experience the god-given worthiness in those around us, we are missing out on a tangible mystical experience in the here and now.

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As we head into this summer, I am quite intentionally speaking of this congregation as a *Heart of the Community*. The two nouns of that phrase are significant:

1. Heart - life giving, led by love and compassion;
2. Community - a coming together; an open togetherness.

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For two decades or more, St. David's Church has summarized its ministry as *Welcoming In* and *Reaching Out*. The "community" that we are a 'heart of' is both this particular community of faith AND the community beyond this plot of land and the people in this room.

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We expect and hope to make spiritual connections with our christ and creator *in* and *through* the life of the church and so - the goat part of our nature (our inward looking mission) motivates us to ensure that we give our church the capacity to meet our needs to be able to worship together, to study together, to enjoy the fellowship of fellow followers of Jesus.

At the same time, we expect and hope to keep this inner circle an open ended circle. Our sheep nature wants to keep the open doors, open... so that faith seekers can find, and the spiritually hungry can be fed.

An important part of being a *Heart of the Community* is accepting the opportunity that the open door swings both ways:

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- having been fed, we choose to go out to feed;
- having been quenched, we choose to go out and find the thirsty;
- as a healed and liberated people, we choose to insert ourselves into the lives of those who need us to come to them;
- having laid our souls bare to a God who (in deepest love) unconditionally accepts both the best and worst of who we are, we choose to reach out with that blanket of grace to warmly embrace the lonely and rejected.

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For me, the parable of the sheep and goats is not about being scared into behaving in compassionate ways, it is about confronting the trap of only letting faith and grace move one way... into our lives.

It is okay to be goat-like (God wants us to enjoy God's presence and influence on us as individuals or as small, safe circles of faith).

The parable reminds us that abiding in the shepherd's pasture is so much more. As a famous psalmist once wrote, we are led to green pastures and still, clear waters, but we also share the a banquet with others: generous beyond any expectation.

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We truly find ourselves in the middle of real world holiness, when we judge others as worthy of the grace of God and our good graces.

When we do allow ourselves to see a holy heart beating within the chest of the ones who are easy to ignore, we will know that the kingdom of God can come on earth as it is in heaven.

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The song goes...

They'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love....

And more so...

WE will know we are Christians by our love.

Let us judge ourselves as worthy of this calling.

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Let us pray:

Good Shepherd God, may your love be poured out on us and may your love (through us) be brought into the hidden corners of our community. Amen.

#1MV "Let Us Build a House"