

“The Parables According to Matthew, Coda Part 3: Sheep and Goats”
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for November 26th 2017 (Reign of Christ Sunday)
by Foster Freed

Matthew 25: 31-46

Of the many images we have of Christ...

...of the many images we have of God...

...suffice it to say that the image of Christ...the image of God...as
judge...

...the image of God as **the** Judge...

...is not an image to which most of us enthusiastically respond. On the contrary: the thought of being “judged” is not one that warms the cockles of our hearts...and the thought of coming face to face with a judge is not one that causes tender thoughts to rise. And yet:

There can be no denying the fact that our scriptures—Old and New Testaments alike—continually present God as the one...indeed, the only one—worthy to offer judgment. Nor should we overlook the extent to which there is comfort to be found in that thought...if we think it through carefully. As those who know, only too well, the flawed nature—the incomplete nature—of the justice we human beings tend to mete out, we should take comfort in the possibility of one-day standing in the courtroom of a judge who truly sees, who truly hears, who truly knows: in short, **the** Judge, the one capable of rendering a true verdict and an authentic judgment. That’s actually a heartening prospect. Nevertheless...judgment remains something from which we instinctively avert our gaze. And really: who can blame us...

...who can blame us when we ponder the full implications of judgment...and the true grandeur of the Judge before whom we will one day stand, our lives clearly on display in the presence of One before whom “all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden.” Nor is there much point...much point in pretending that this morning’s parable does not succeed in capturing, perhaps more powerfully than any other Biblical passage, the full weight...the full weight of the Judgment to which we will one day be summoned.

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I have long been of the opinion....long been of the belief...that the Parable of the Sheep and Goats is a parable that somehow manages to be both the most clear cut of the parables—providing some pretty irrefutable answers to some of life’s most pressing questions—but at the same time manages to offer itself as a parable mired in a bit of

ambiguity: leaving us precisely where Jesus, the teller of the parable—often chooses to leave us! Asking the tough questions! Wrestling for answers! But before we go there...before we ponder the answers that the Parable of the Sheep and Goats **refuses** to yield with any sort of clarity...let's first make sure that we are clear on the answer it does provide to a pretty basic question about the **basis** of the judgment on which we one day will be judged. And you know: here I am called back to Mark Twain's delightful statement concerning the Bible, namely that it wasn't the parts of the Bible he didn't understand that were a problem for him. No! It was the parts that he did understand that were the real challenge.

Then the King will say to those on his right, "Come, you who 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 drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me." Then the righteous will answer him, saying, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me." But then he will say to those on his left, "Depart from me, you execrable ones into the fire of the Age prepared for the Slanderer and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." Then they also will answer, saying, "Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?" Then he will answer them, saying, "Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me."

And yes: it's pretty hard to pretend that we find any of that confusing. That there is ambiguity in this parable is a theme to which I will return shortly; that there is, however, a great deal of clarity on offer here is something that we dare not overlook, tempting though that might be. Indeed: go no further...

...go no further than our classic Protestant emphasis upon *sola fide* (remember the solas; we were done with them a mere three weeks ago!)...remember, in particular, *sola fide*, by faith alone: the insistence that we cannot earn our way into heaven through our pious actions, the insistence that heaven is a matter of placing our faith, our trust, our *sola fide*, in God and God alone. But what if...what if feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the prisoner, tending to the sick, ministering to the needs of any who suffer: what if none of that counts as a pious action? What if such endeavours have nothing to do with acts of piety...but are simply the basic expression of compassion expected of anyone who has encountered the compassion of God in the face of Jesus Christ. And yes: what if...what if the parable does, in fact, suggest that how we live is more important than what we believe? What if the parable does, in fact, suggest that talking-the-talk is of far less significance than walking-the-walk? In short: what if this parable is telling us that God's judgment of us will be on the basis of the

ways in which we have **lived** the Gospel, including—quite clearly—the way in which the Gospel was lived-out even by those who failed to believe the Gospel, even by those who did not recognize the judge. Even those...even such as these...can be counted among the sheep, not because of their right beliefs, their proper prayers, their unflagging zeal in things religious. No: that appears to have nothing to do with it!

And you can see...you can see how threatening all of that can prove to an institution such as ours...and to those, such as myself, who provide the leadership for an institution such as this. Jesus would make it so much easier for people like myself, were he to assure everyone that the real heart of things was for people to find their way into a pew, comfortable or otherwise. But no! At any rate: that's not what this parable has to tell us! It's not what this parable has to teach us. A day of judgment, a day of reckoning will come. And on that day judgment will be based—a reckoning will be rendered—on the basis of how we lived...above all...how we loved. Feeding the hungry, providing drink to the thirsting, clothing the naked, visiting the sick, bringing cheer to the outcast, That will be the basis...the only basis...that will be used by the just judge on the day of judgment. But what would the look like...how would any of that play out...when the rubber hits the road??

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Well. As I said earlier: there is a dimension to this parable that could not be any more clear than it already is; roll up your sleeves, get your hands dirty, put the Gospel into action! It couldn't be plainer than that. And yet!

Any time...any time I try to put myself in the place of the judge...I quickly find myself wondering just how things would unfold once that criteria is put into place. Oh yes: all of us have likely made the acquaintance of some very nasty people. I have no doubt on that score. And yes: I suspect most of us have also met a handful of some very special saints, those who truly try to walk the Christian faith in an exemplary way. I have no doubt on that score, either. But it's the rest of us: the silent (and at times far from silent) majority, who can keep me up at night, thinking and hoping and praying. They are the ones...

...more accurately **we** are the ones, since I like to number myself as one of them!...

...we are the ones who have both sheep-like and goat-like moments: times when we feed the hungry ones, clothe the naked ones, visit the sick ones, comfort the imprisoned ones, provide a cold drink to the thirsting ones. But we are also the people who sometimes avert our eyes. We're too busy. We're in too much of a hurry. We're too suspicious of the story they are handing us. Or perhaps...perhaps...they just look too scary...and so we walk on down the road, having ignored those who cry out for our time and attention. And having done that...and having become the sort of people who blow hot and cold...who sometimes step up to the plate but who on other occasions find themselves dropping the ball...

...as those who sometimes blow hot, sometimes blow cold, who much of the time find themselves mired in the middle...

...as such as these, how will it go for us on the great day...how will it go for us when we stand before the judgment seat of the One who truly sees, who truly hears, who truly knows. What judgment will he possibly be able to render. And yes: no sooner do I ask that question, than I find myself put in mind of the wonderful truth the great Russian writer and freedom-fighter, Aleksander Solzenitzsyn articulated many years ago. In the classic words of that great writer: "the line separating good and evil...the line separating good and evil...passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either, but right through every human heart, and through all human hearts." Your heart...my heart...each and every human heart. Or as St. Paul so passionately insisted: "...all have sinned...all have sinned...and have fallen short of the glory of God." But then where...where oh where...does that leave **us** on this day of judgment?"

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Well: it leaves us, I suspect, precisely where Christ—in the telling of his parables—wants to leave us: with more questions than answers. Christ, or so I have come to believe—through the telling of his parables—rarely, if ever, provides comfort without also providing challenge.. There is a fine line between comfort and complacency...and the Jesus whose parables we have been pondering, on again and off again, over the past three years, most certainly chooses to land us on the comfort (rather than the complacent) side of that divide. While he most certainly does not wish to deny us the hope that is ours when we ponder life as sheep, neither does he wish to deny us the self-examination prompted as we ponder the unsettling possibility that we might, in fact, be numbered among the goats. And so yes: having read and considered so many of Christ's parables—three summers ago from Mark, two summers ago from Luke, this past summer from Matthew—there is something wholly appropriate in our concluding that lengthy journey with this parable from Matthew...this parable unique to Matthew...in which we are left with a stark choice: as those who have sometimes said "yes" to Christ by saying "yes" to our neighbours; as those who at other times have said "no" to Christ by saying "no" to our neighbours. In short: as those who have, at times, aligned ourselves with the sheep...and at other times with the goats. None of which...none of which ought to obscure for us the final parable Jesus tells: the one he told with his life rather than with his lips. Because here's the thing.

No sooner does the parable of the Sheep and the Goats reach its conclusion...no sooner does this final chapter of parables in Matthew come to a close...than Jesus finds himself caught up in the swirl of events that led, a mere two days later, to his betrayal by one of his closest friends, his arrest, his abandonment by others of his friends, his interrogation at the hands of a small group of grotesquely flawed human judges, and eventually his execution at the hands of those charged with the responsibility of carrying out this blatant act of **in**justice. And yes: in an especially

wonderful twist, he—in effect—trades places with “Bar-abbas”, a man whose name simply means “the son of the father”: a.k.a. “Everyman”. And so the judge becomes the one being judged. And the sheep—the lamb of God—bears the burden of the goats, in fact becomes numbered with the goats. And yes: the supreme deity—the God who fashioned the heavens and the earth—becomes our struggling neighbor. In need of our care...but also deeply aware, even in **his** hour of need...deeply aware of our even greater need. And so he chooses to see in our wavering glance, the eyes of those who hunger...those who thirst...those in need of shelter...those languishing in prison or in sick-houses...those who yearn for their time of visitation...those who cry out for their time of embrace...their day of redemption. To such as these—in their complacency and their care...in their riches and in their poverty...in the midst of their most precious triumphs...in the aftermath of their most painful of defeats...to such as these he has chosen to be a neighbor...has chosen to be a friend...has chosen to be their God.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ. Praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ.