

Sermon: The Least of These  
Last Sunday after Pentecost, Year A  
Matthew 25:31-46

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“Just as you did it to the least of these...you did it to me.”

In both our Ezekiel and Matthew readings of today we are inundated with the imagery of sheep. In Ezekiel we hear of scattered sheep that will be gathered, lost or strayed sheep that will be found, fat sheep separated from skinny sheep, (Lord, help us!), and then in Matthew, sheep that will be separated from the goats.

Now sheep were more valued than goats in Jesus’ day because sheep had more commercial worth; hence the sheep were depicted on the right hand of the Shepherd, Jesus, and the goats were depicted on his left. Jesus goes on to tell of what it will be like at the last judgment. For those of us who have been taught that we are saved by God’s grace and not by our own works, this passage can cause some confusion; the passage certainly appears at first glance to be all about what we do and if we do the right things we get to stand in the favored position with the sheep. And if we don’t do the right things then we are destined to hang out with the goats in eternal punishment.

But I wonder if Matthew the writer is doing something else here? Maybe Matthew is not out to scare or condemn but to give us a picture of what spiritual health looks like. Perhaps Matthew is not talking about who is saved and who is not saved; indeed Jesus came for the salvation of all people. But perhaps Matthew is simply using an exaggerated illustration, as he is often inclined to do, to teach us what it looks like to participate in God’s kingdom. That those who would follow Jesus would in turn do the things Jesus describes: “For 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.”

This leaves the righteous listeners scratching their heads because they don’t *remember* doing any of those things for Jesus. They ask, “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?” And here Jesus gives a critical answer to their understanding, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the *least of these* who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

This passage is all about discipleship. As the Episcopal Church becomes less of the establishment church, we have a wonderful opportunity before us. In the midst of a culture that is changing rapidly and has less of a “joining” mentality, we must focus less upon filling up our pews, less upon gaining *members* and more about our becoming *disciples*. That means practicing what we preach. Consistently doing God’s work and not just hearing about it. While it is still very important that we come together regularly for worship, that we be fed spiritually

by word and sacrament and by being together, we are then to go out in the world, being a disciple of Christ wherever we are: in our homes, in our neighborhoods, in our Facebook conversations, in the grocery store, in the courtroom, in the doctors' office, in the classroom. Because God is present here and now, yes in church but not just in church! There is no place where God is NOT present. It is amazing how when you are paying attention, the opportunities to do for the "least of these" present themselves. And, of course, sometimes we ourselves are the "least of these".

The words offered in the Matthew passage today give us a spiritual reality check, give us crystal clear instructions on who we are to be paying attention to: the least, the smallest, the weak and vulnerable, the poor, the imprisoned, the sick, the hungry. How we treat the "least of these" is an excellent barometer of our spiritual health, both as individuals and as a church. You want to see Jesus? Look into the face of someone who is weak and vulnerable. This is what Jesus is telling us. You want to do something for Jesus? Do something for someone who is weak or vulnerable. This is a call not to ignore or overlook those who are fragile or have no power but to pay attention to someone who is hurting in some way and to behold the face of Jesus.

Our PAX youth group spent time on Wednesday helping out at the Verona food pantry in an effort to feed the hungry. Over 15 of our youth got up on their first day of Thanksgiving vacation to serve others; what wonderful role models they are for the rest of us! They were encouraged by the coordinators to not only bag the onions, but to talk to the clients who were there to receive food, to listen to their stories, to see the face of Christ in their vulnerable faces. This was not about an "us" and "them" mentality but just "us," for in God's kingdom, we are just "us."

Jesus' words that Matthew offers us are not meant to be just words we hear on a Sunday morning while we sit in a pew in a church. These words are meant to get us up and moving and participating in God's kingdom! As followers we are indeed God's sheep. And yet we all spend some time hanging out with the goats. (There is a little bit of goat in all of us.) But our nature as God's sheep is to respond to the voice of Christ and to move toward and not away from the "least of these." Everyone can do something for somebody.

Opportunities abound. Do you sometimes wonder where God is? Matthew our writer gives us a big clue in today's reading. Are you looking for meaning in your life? Look around you today and in the days to come and see where God might be calling you to reach out to the hurting, the hungry, the imprisoned, the vulnerable - "the least of these." It is there you will see God.

Amen.