

Please indulge me to begin this sermon the same way we often begin worship: with confession. Mark Twain summed it up for me best: *Most people are bothered by those passages of Scripture they do not understand, but the passages that bother me are those I do understand.*

Today's gospel bothers me as much as any.

I am dead certain that I am a goat, passing by Christ on the bus and the street, on the offramp and online when I delete another plea from an advocacy group to make a phone call to better the broken system.

I confess that with furious steps full of purpose or fear, and usually both, I hustle by human need on my way to address some other human need, too often my own, and I am haunted by the relentless echoes of this text pinballing around in the emptiness of my soul.

I try to rationalize, counting up the thousands of dollars and hours I've given away to try to help, an internal telethon tote-board of compassion, but like Peter forgiving a brother seven times, my meager total falls woefully short of the goal I hear from the lips of Jesus.

I give up rationalizing and begin to despair, knowing as a hardened perfectionist that even one stranger unwelcomed means I failed the test, one dollar spent on myself instead of given away to someone needier than I is the smoking gun that will send me up the river forever.

My Protestant work ethic and twisted personal idolatry demand that I break free of community and save the world alone.

The hungry eyes watch me eat, the homeless youth watch me walk to my warm apartment, and I shudder at the eternal punishment I know that Christ the righteous King will exact from my soft, fat, selfish hide that absolutely deserves to burn forever in a bonfire hot enough at last to warm the suffering cold I wasted my self-absorbed life ignoring.

What gives me the right to be so wrong; who do I think that I am?

In the scalding light of this text, I think that I am a goat, which I think is the biblical word for *American consumer*, an unholy mix of insatiable appetite and apathy.

Martin Luther, who also had his own issues with impossible standards, thinks that I am *simul justus et peccator*, saint and sinner at the same time, a hybrid of sheep and goat.

But who does Christ think that I am?

That, after all, is the opinion that matters.

There is another distinction in this text that is easily missed: those that are inside the parable, and those that are outside of it - the actors and the audience.

The actors, the ones who gather to be judged, are the nations.

The audience is the disciples, gathered around Jesus the storyteller.

They are not part of the nations, or *ethnoi* in Greek, a word also sometimes translated Gentiles, referring to those outside of the circle of God's covenant of promise.

Jesus is talking to the insiders about the fate of the outsiders, all those who by definition do not know God, so that one of the surprises of this text is that salvation is widened, not only to the chosen children, but also to sheep who do not even know they are sheep yet share the ethic of the compassionate community, who behave like the saved are supposed to do.

What Jesus once said to these same disciples about Jewish strangers in Matthew chapter ten-- *whoever welcomes you welcomes me...and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one*

*of these little ones in the name of a disciple--truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward--is now writ large in this expanded, international scene of identification of sheep among goats.*

Does this realization mitigate the parable for us?

Does the fact that we are secure in the insider promises of baptism, tethered inseparably to Christ no matter what, replace the horror of certain judgment with sweet, certain hope?

Leaning hard on the grace of God in Christ is Lutheran gold, and it's our only hope really, but we can too easily let that blunt the edge of this story for us, too easily hang on cheap grace as a way of letting ourselves off the hook.

The fact is, we are also, at the same time, both disciples and nations.

In my case, I am a Christian, though not necessarily a very good one, and an American, which for all of our national generosity is still probably a disadvantage.

I am part of a nation that idealizes and promotes the goats, that names unchecked consumption "patriotism" and argues incessantly about whose fault it is that the prisoner is in prison or the sick patient doesn't have insurance and whether what we call charity and what Jesus would call royal protocol is moral or not because we have to judge whether it is deserved.

I am part of a society that idolizes the self and crowns its kings and judges based on strength and security and self-promotion, not anonymous vulnerability.

I am part of a system that both alleviates and perpetuates hunger and suffering, that is itself a hybrid of compassionate sheep and self-serving goat, yet I am also a disciple...and that track record is mixed too.

I cannot look in the mirror and make the decision who I really am.

None of us can, much less are we qualified to judge one another.

Sheep and goats entangled together, we cannot see Jesus among us, and we cannot see ourselves, and we cannot see one another clearly enough to dare the presumption of separation that is the jurisdiction of our king alone, whose opinion is the only one that matters.

What we can see, though, is need.

We can see hunger and thirst, poverty and prison, sickness and sadness, and we can decide how to respond, which is why Jesus tells us this terribly clear story.

There is something else we can see, if we look.

We can also see that at the end of the story, the story continues.

This story, this relentlessly haunting parable, is the grand finale of Jesus' teaching, the stirring conclusion of his last sermon, but it is not the end of Matthew's good news.

From here Jesus will go to the cross, where he will be a thirsty prisoner, a naked and suffering stranger identified by a crude sign and a crown of thorns as *the king of the Jews*.

His disciples, the insiders who know the story, will not see him or attend to him, because they have run away from him like frightened goats.

The king will chase them down and find them.

Death, hell and official spin control all fail to prevent him from gathering with them one more time, with one more thing to say:

*When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.*

*And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.*

*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them ... and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.*

*And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*

Matthew ends his good news there, because that is where we are in the story now.

Today, still, disciples worship and doubt.

Christ the King sends disciples to widen the circle of salvation among the nations, to baptize and also to teach, to give others a certain hope and also to haunt them with an unrelenting ethic of attentive compassion.

Citizens of the kingdom of heaven, new and old, still look after but also overlook the needy, and we still need this parable to haunt and bother us back in the direction of who we are truly created and called, summoned and saved to be.

Why?

Because Christ continues to be with us always, to the end of the age, and he continues to need our care.