



“Sheep and Goats”

Christ the King Sunday -- November 20, 2011

Text: Ezekiel 34:11-6, 20-24; Matthew 25:31-46

On a hot, humid Sunday in Pittsburgh in July nineteen years ago, I was consecrated as a deaconess with the Lutheran Deaconess Association. A deaconess is a profession and vocation in the church in which a woman, feeling a call by God lives and gives her life in service to the Church.

As a child growing up, the church my family and I were members of had a deaconess on staff. I watched what she did, how she led women’s Bible study, the Sunday School opening, taught confirmation class, served as a communion assistant, and was actively involved in social ministry. Years before, when I had been in eighth grade, we had to do a paper on what we wanted to be when we grew up. I was intrigued by this concept of serving God and my neighbor at the same time, so I interviewed her for my paper.

Had you told me at that time that not only would I become a deaconess, but that I would have gone on to become a pastor, I would have laughed at the idea. Being a deaconess was one thing, but being a pastor – not something I had even thought about God calling me into at that time.

The beauty of the consecration service was that I could select lessons that were meaningful, as well as ask people who were important to me to be part of the service. I still remember that day – vividly and for many reasons. But one reason I remember the day so well is that our Gospel from Matthew was what I had selected.

At the time, Matthew’s Gospel was appropriate based off the various ministry experiences I had had. A field education experience learning to provide pastoral care in a correctional center for sex offenders. Leading a Bible study in the women’s wing of the county jail. Visiting the sick and the lonely. Helping with Meals on Wheels. I was convinced, and still am convinced that serving the “least of these” as Jesus refers to was my calling in life.

But instead of energy or enthusiasm, today’s lessons leave me feeling guilty. Here’s why:

First, throughout the Ancient Near East, during the time of the Israelites, kings were frequently referenced as shepherds. These kings were to care for their people under their care. They were to protect them, and provide food and shelter for them. Yet, many of the kings did not care for Israel in the way they had promised or were supposed to. Rather than caring for them, the kings would take advantage of the citizens under their charge. The kings would take care of themselves rather than those they were supposed to care for.

Earlier in Ezekiel 34, the word of the Lord is proclaimed to these false shepherds: “As I live, says the Lord God, because my sheep have become a prey, and my sheep have become food for wild animals, since there was no shepherd; and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves, and have not fed my sheep; therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: Thus says the Lord God, I am against the shepherds.” (Ezekiel 34:8-10)

The Lord God was not happy with how the shepherds – elected by the Israelites – were caring for his people. Through Ezekiel, the Lord God proclaimed he was against the shepherds. Not only was the Lord God against the shepherds, but the Lord God was now going to do something about these false shepherds who were leading his people astray. Ezekiel continues:

“I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. . . I will rescue them from all places. . . I will bring them out from the peoples. . . I will feed them with good pasture. . . I MYSELF will be the shepherd of my sheep. . . I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak. . . .” (Ezekiel 34: 11-16, paraphrased).

In these words, it is the Lord who will be shepherd of his people. The Lord God boldly proclaims, MY sheep, meaning Israel belonged to the Lord. It was the Lord’s way of claiming ownership on a people who had forgotten the Lord God as their Shepherd.

The second reason these texts leave me feeling guilty is the amount of accountability they place on each and every one of us, whether as church member, or as pastor. The stakes are high. Jesus reminds his disciples that ‘the poor you will always have with you.’ One of Israel’s promises was to care for the poor, the widow, and the orphan. It was a promise Israel had forgotten.

It was – and is a promise and a challenge still today. On Friday while getting my hair cut at a local beauty shop, two women came in wanting to know where the CAP office was. At least four of us tried to give the two women directions on how to get there from the salon. After they left, discussion in the shop shifted to the needs of the community, the absence of the CAP office, and the impact of this loss in the area at a time when both the demand and the need are greater than before.

The conversation brought home the reality of today's texts: "as you have done it to the least of these, even so have you done it for me."

Yet, there is also a particular beauty in Matthew's Gospel today. The beauty lies in the reality of two things. First, is the reality that judging how much or how little we do to help the least of these is not up to us. If it were, I suspect many of us would judge ourselves harsher than what is necessary. If anything, our small, random acts of kindness may be the things we have forgotten about, things or events that happened, never to be thought of or reflected on again. In those moments, we may be like the ones who hear Jesus say, "well done, good and faithful servants. As you have done for the least of these, even so have you done for me." We may be surprised to hear these words, and wonder, "Lord, when did we do these things?"

The second reality is that the small things, those small random acts of kindness are the things that really do matter in life. It is not a matter of what translation of the Bible we use, or whether or not worship is traditional or contemporary. It is not about what we believe in, or even whether or not we agree with what we believe in, or even if we agree to disagree. Instead, at the last, it is a matter of how we have cared for our neighbor, the needy, and the least of these.

May God, who is gracious, continue to grant us the courage to help those most in need, that they may see God's love and care for them through our actions. Thanks be to God. Amen!