

A SERMON PREACHED AT BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN CHURCH,

BETHANY BEACH, DE, ON SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 26, 2017

A shepherd was herding his flock in a remote pasture when suddenly a brand-new BMW advanced out of a dust cloud towards him. The driver, a young man in a Broni suit, Gucci shoes, Ray Ban sunglasses and YSL tie, leans out the window and asks the shepherd, "If I tell you exactly how many sheep you have in your flock, will you give me one?" The shepherd looks at the man, obviously a yuppie, then looks at his peacefully grazing flock and calmly answers, "Sure, Why not?" The yuppie parks his car, whips out his Dell notebook computer, connects it to his AT&T cell phone. He surfs to a NASA page on the internet, where he calls up a GPS satellite navigation system to get an exact fix on his location which he then feeds to another NASA satellite that scans the area in an ultra-high-resolution photo. The young man then opens the digital photo in Adobe Photoshop and exports it to an image processing facility in Hamburg, Germany. Within seconds, he receives an email on his Palm Pilot that the image has been processed and the data stored. He then accesses an MS-SQL database through an ODBC connected Excel spreadsheet with hundreds of complex formulas. He uploads all of this data via an email on his blackberry and, after a few minutes, receives a response. Finally, he prints out a full-color, 150-page report on his hi-tech, miniaturized HP LaserJet printer and finally turns to the shepherd and says, "You have exactly 1,586 sheep." "That's right. Well, I guess you can take one of my sheep.," says the honest shepherd. He watches the young man select one of the animals and looks on amused as the young man stuffs it into the trunk of his car. Then the shepherd says to the young man, "Hey, if I can tell you exactly what your business is, will you give me back my sheep?" The young man thinks about it for a second and then says, "Okay, Why not?" "You're a consultant." says the shepherd. "Wow! That's correct," says the yuppie, "but how did you guess that?" "No guessing required." answered the savvy shepherd, "You showed up here even though nobody called you; you want to get paid for an answer I already knew; to a question I never asked; and you know zero about my business.....now give me back my dog."ⁱ

I guess the consultant would have had a difficult time separating the sheep from the goats in this morning's parable as well. Jesus tells this story near the end of the *Gospel of Matthew*, and it comes to us as the last reading of the Sundays after Pentecost before we slip so innocently but brusquely into Advent next Sunday. In most Christian churches of the world today is called the Sunday of Christ the King, and the readings (known in biblical circles as The Judgment of the Nations) reflect the kind of kingdom over which he plans to rule. The first reading from the prophet Ezekiel speaks of Israel's kings, some of whom were bad, some of whom were good, and predicts that Israel will be ruled by a shepherd-messiah who will feed and care for the people.ⁱⁱ The second reading from Paul's *Letter to the Ephesians* speaks of how Jesus will be the Lord of both the church and the entire universe, now and in the age to come.ⁱⁱⁱ And the gospel reading compares Jesus to a king who moves among his subjects to

see how he is treated, for what is done and the way it is done to the least of those who are part of his earthly family has done it to him likewise. It is probably one of the most famous admonitions in the bible, and one we are meant to take quite seriously, as this portion of the gospel text comes just two days before the Passover when the chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, and they schemed to arrest Jesus secretly and kill him. So you might say these words were part of his final will and testament, as the next time he speaks in public is at the dinner he held with his disciples just before he was betrayed.

There is a lot of biblical discussion regarding these texts about just who are the sheep and who are the goats, as well regarding to whom Jesus meant to hear his words. In my opinion this is mere nitpicking and ignores the concept of justice under a righteous ruler who sees things as they really are and is not fooled by conscious attempts to minister to the less fortunate with half enthusiasms and partial care. In the kingdom that Jesus envisions and attempts to bring to fruition, the sheep, who are more treasured by the shepherd than the less woolly, less meaty goats will find favor because of the way they act under pastoral care. Sheep have gotten a bad reputation over the years as lazy and smelly; in this gospel, they are the chosen ones because they were willing to follow the shepherd. The goats - - more independent, harder to herd, more stubborn and willing to consume anything, even trash as part of their daily meal, find themselves on the less favored side of judgment. The amusing thing about this story is whom we identify with. Almost everyone sees themselves as a sheep, but, Matthew insists, Christ is not fooled. The proof is in the pudding, so here is a time when works, especially those of a beneficent nature, do matter. We might really call this reading "The Final Accounting." We are not the first to notice a great opportunity here. The medieval church took advantage of this text and actually kept a record of how much one had to pay in order to get oneself or one's loved ones out of purgatory. After confessing one's sins, an amount was required to be paid to the church, called an indulgence. The greatest cathedrals of Europe were built on the backs of poor folk who due to the fear of eternal damnation spent all they could muster trying to be in a better place in the life to come, hoping to be seen as a sheep rather than a goat, a redeemed believer vs. an everlasting sinner. The Roman Catholic Church has begun the practice of indulgences once again in order to build up God's kingdom on earth. Luckily, this is not the last word on judgment. If it were, we'd all be in trouble, because the line between the sheep and the goats runs through the middle of each of us.^{iv} The last word is the promise of the resurrection, when all who believe will be raised up into God's loving arms. (Or to put it another way, when the kingdom will break through and become the only reality the world acknowledges.)

Of course the question arises as to how good we are in treating one another in a manner that would make us worthy right-handers in the brave new world Jesus is preaching about. "The bottom line of the Sheep and Goats parable is this: The way we treat others is the way we treat Jesus. That means, sin is not defined as the violation of rules, but the violation of people."^v Hence, we need to be more careful as well as more intentional in how we interact with one another. Do we take the time in our daily life to do things that lift one another up? I was pleased to read a myriad of messages on Facebook that wished others a blessed Thanksgiving. I even received texts from some friends and colleagues that asked that we pause and be thankful for all that we have accomplished this past year, despite limitations that were placed upon our being able to have completed more of the tasks we had intended to finish. This is a good and lively spirit that we should carry with us in all that we are and do in the days ahead. A thankful heart gathers others to it. Is it possible to see goodness in all things, and to encourage others to spread a similar vision? Constant whining or complaining fosters no good will towards anyone or anything. Since Advent is just a week away, can we make it part of our personal mission for the season leading up to Christmas to curb (as some do when giving things up for Lent) our attitude and adopt a major adjustment to discover and point out to ourselves and to those around us the light that shines in the

darkness? Can we see and call forth the grace of God at work in even the smallest of life's offerings: the smile from a cashier, the note from a friend, the Christmas card from an estranged family member, the slowly travelling car in front of us on the highway, the thank you for a door held open at the department store.... Little things: they add up to one big thing, or many big things. Be a thankful receiver as well as a cheerful doer, and the coming season will be much brighter. There is no such thing as negative goodness. These are not just platitudes: they are an invitation to participate in the beloved community of God, so consider yourself tagged or poked or however else you might be drawn in. You see, that's what is interesting about the kingdom of God. It is always looking for a way to break through into an often hostile world. Whatever we can do to hold the door ajar so there might be a coming in and a going out for the benefit of all is what we are called to, both as Christians and Disciples of Christ. Jesus says "I am the door;" if we seek to emulate Christ, we too are that passageway, and to great and good effect.

In closing I want to emphasize that this parable (or any of the parables of Jesus) is not about merely doing good works. The gospel writers, and the writer of the *Epistle of James* go to great lengths to disabuse us of the notion that our charity alone is what makes us worthy to be one with God. Surely the rank and file of Hollywood and Washington, D.C. are learning that lesson the hard way these past few months. What saves us (if that is the correct word) is our coming together to create community, a community that locates itself in the communion we share on Sundays and at the holidays. Sharing is what makes us a community, and uniting is what seals it, makes it live, allows it to function, gives it meaning. That is why it is so important to attend church services and events, because it is therein that we not only encounter God, but we learn and adopt differing visions of the Divine that foster a closeness we cannot nurture on our own. God is present in our one-on-one time with God in prayer; God is surely present when two or three are gathered in God's name (the implication being that the power of many is greater than the power of one). That is why we should never cease to gather together to ask the Lord's blessing, for as the hymn goes, "God forgets not God's own" and remembers what the least have done, as well as the many. May we humbly start out once again, we few, and do what the many had never thought of, nor imagined.

Amen.

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ⁱ <http://www.make4fun.com/stories/Clean-jokes/10213-SHEPHERD>

ⁱⁱ *Sundays and Seasons, Year A*, November 26, 2017, p. 314

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

^{iv} http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1019

^v *Ibid.*