

“Tending the Shepherd”
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia
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Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24
Matthew 25:31-46

I want you to know that Matthew 25:31-46 is one of my favorite bible passages, and has been one of the ones that has presented the most compelling mandate, or direction, for my ministry. I also want you to know that sometimes for clergy our favorite passages are the hardest to preach on. I was talking with a clergy friend about this last week, and she agreed, saying “All my best sermons are on passages I don’t even like, and the ones I love, all I’ve got is ‘listen to this passage, it’s so great!’”

I cannot trump what Jesus said here, but I will take a stab at helping his words resonate, with hopes that they may hang out in your imagination and captivate you as they have me.

We have before us a judgement, between sheep and goats. No one likes a judgmental Jesus, unless you are a sanctimonious, annoying person. We like a Jesus of love and grace, who welcomes us no matter what we have done and frankly doesn’t give a flip what we have done or left undone. Leave the holier-than-thou stuff to the Pharisees, thank you very much.

Sorry to break it to you, but we’re not getting that Jesus today. I’m not sure what Jesus had against goats, but the scriptures make it clear that we should not want to be or become one. Hear how goats treat Jesus: “For I was hungry, and you gave me no food. I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit

me...‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’⁴⁶And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote of Jesus’ judgment: God comes into the very midst of evil and of death, and judges the evil in us and in the world. And by judging us, God cleanses and sanctifies us, comes to us with grace and love.¹

The eternal punishment Jesus reserves for the goats does not come through acts of violence, manipulation of power, lying about the truth, or any other overt sin. Rather, it is the apocalypse of doing nothing. And doing nothing can be really easy to do. As the saying goes, The only thing needed for the triumph of evil is for good people to do nothing.

Our church’s confirmation classroom doubles as a 2-3 year old classroom at the Take My Hand daycare during the week. One of the features of the classroom is a beta fish in a tank. This fish has captured the hearts of the confirmation students, who became increasingly concerned week after week by the declining water level in the fish’s tank. The classroom isn’t our domain, so it wasn’t the church’s job to fill or clean the tank. And I admit, I forgot to say something to the Take My Hand staff about the teenagers’ concerns, even though I had the best intentions to say something. I have to say I can completely understand how the water got so low. I am a much better doggy mama than I ever was of fish. Dogs look pleadingly in you eyes when they need food or water, attention and play, a walk, or a piece of that hot turkey and gravy or bulgogi you are about to eat. They look at you and you feel they are judging your soul based on how you respond. It is hard to ignore a dog when it needs something. Fish, on the other hand, never complain. They don’t even make eye contact with you. I remember being my daughter’s age and pulling my pet fish, which was my mom’s guilt offering since she couldn’t get me a dog, out of its tank with a net so I could pet it. It didn’t take me long to realize there was no enjoyment on the fish’s

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, sermon preached in Barcelona 1928, reprinted in *The Living Pulpit*, Oct. 1, 1997

side, so with disappointment I let the fish keep to itself. As an adult, I can understand how a fish in a tank can become part of the furniture. Anyway, on one Sunday when I was with the New Members Class while Jonathan Phillips was teaching the confirmation class, one of our youth took it upon herself to add water to that beta fish's tank. I have to say, the fish has been looking friskier ever since.

Today is traditionally known as Christ the King Sunday, or Reign of Christ Sunday. While the Gospel passage mentions nothing about Jesus' kingship or rule, we do see him making a judgement upon the nations. So his sorting is not just for individuals; it is an evaluation of how the policies and practices of the nations impact the people for whom they exist-- especially the most vulnerable.

As this country prepares to implement a new budget for 2018, I always remember something Christian ethicist Jim Wallace says: a budget is a moral document. A nation's priorities around spending reflect its moral priorities. Securing the most dramatic tax cuts for the wealthy and for corporations that aren't even people, while increasing taxes on the poor and middle class, and cutting programs that help the needy, will not make the United States a more moral country. Ask Pete Shanno how budget cuts will translate into increased numbers of hungry or food-insecure children in Bergen County- through his volunteer work through Center for Food Action, he has seen the impact firsthand. Marian Wright Edelman challenged us to look to the lives of children: our choices today will have an impact on their well being now and their future tomorrow. Are we contributing to the crises children face, or are we contributing to the solutions they urgently need? When looking at the priorities of a nation's budget, we need to ask this question about the children, as well as the poor, the elderly, and any vulnerable group. I would also add we need to ask about how our decisions and budget commitments will impact the earth. Although the earth is not a human, the earth *is* a character in God's

creation and it desperately needs our concern and care if we are to be its guests for generations to come.

Jesus, as one who chose to be with people on the margins and lived on the margins himself as a political and spiritual radical, knew what it was like to suffer. His experience on the cross unites all who experience oppression with Jesus. During college I volunteered in homeless ministries, and because of the Matthew 25 gospel passage I looked at them, wondering, “Jesus, will I find you in the face of the people I serve?” In the frailty of their bodies as they managed their hygiene and various diseases without a home base, and in their perseverance even in the face of the indignities of the street, the cops, or simply the goats that would pass them by, I believe I caught glimpses of the Christ. Working with homeless people was healing for me personally; for the first time, I saw that Jesus identified with my mom and me when we were kicked out of our apartments over the years when she was unemployed and could not pay the rent. We had couch surfed between family and friends until Mom could find steady work and a new apartment for us. Whereas I had once felt shame for the poverty Mom and I experienced, I came to see instead that the *existence* of poverty is shameful in a place where so much plenty abounds. I came to see that Jesus was very much in the midst of that experience. A phrase by the writer ntozake shange resonates with my discovery: “i found god in myself/ (& i loved her/ i loved her fiercely).”

The beauty of the incarnation is that Jesus can be born into any body. It is interesting that this Matthew text comes on the last Sunday of the church year. Beginning next Sunday, a new church year starts and our focus will be on looking towards Bethlehem, as we do each year, so that God can be birthed again into a tiny helpless child, Jesus, who would be those names we would want to call a righteous ruler: Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace. But Matthew 25 is an incarnation story, too. It shows us that God can also be born into the lives and the struggles of any of us.

What Jesus proposes we do involves a mutuality between shepherd and sheep. Like Ezekiel says, God promises, “I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. ¹⁶I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak.” This is the Good Shepherd we know from the 23rd Psalm, and this metaphor gets continued by Jesus in the gospels when he asks, “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until you find it?” But then Jesus puts the responsibility on his disciples; in John 21, Jesus asks Simon Peter, “Do you love me? Then feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep.” To be a disciple of Christ does not *just* mean you get to be led around to green pastures. To be a disciple of Christ means you need to be able to recognize the incarnation, or the presence of Jesus made flesh, in the least of these.