

## “Just Desserts”

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November 23, 2014 Christ the King Sunday, year A

Ezekiel 32:11-16, 20-24      Matthew 25:31-46

Which do you like best, sheep or goats? In the story Ginny read this morning, the Son of Man judged the nations the same way a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. The people who were like sheep were put on the right side and blessed. And the goats were put on the left and cursed.

Is that fair? I'm not a farmer, but I know that in ancient times, goats were just as valuable to a shepherd as sheep. People could drink goat milk, eat the meat, and use the hide for leather and the hair to make tents and clothing. Besides that, goats are much more fun and entertaining than sheep. So why are goats the bad guys in this parable?

Sheep are actually quite stupid and dependent. But they also seem to be obedient and trusting, so the biblical writers would often use the relationship of a sheep to a shepherd as a metaphor for a trusting relationship with God. In the gospel of John (10:4) Jesus talked about how the sheep follow the good shepherd because they know his voice. Goats, on the other hand, have minds of their own and get into mischief. You have to keep your eyes on a goat. If you turn your back, they may eat something dear to you, or lower their heads and charge.

According to early Jewish law, a goat was supposed to carry the sins of the people into the wilderness on the Day of Atonement. A priest would lay his hands on a sacrificial goat, confess the sins of the people, and then send the goat away into the wilderness (Lev. 16:20-22). That's where the word "scapegoat" comes from. And goats make good "scapegoats" because they like to wander off on their own. A sheep, on the other hand, would just stand there and look stupid, or run back to where it came from.

So does God love sheep more than goats? Does God want people to be dumb and helpless? What if we're not the docile and obedient types, but we have a mind of our own and tend to get ourselves into trouble? If our personality is more like a goat than a sheep, are we doomed?

It's impossible for a goat to become a sheep. And no one can change their basic personality. But this is not about sheep, goats or personality types. In the passage from Ezekiel that Soon Hee read this morning, God was not judging between sheep and goats, but between sheep and sheep; between fat sheep and lean sheep, between those who push with side and shoulder, and tread down another's food, and those who are scattered as a result. There are greedy sheep, as well as bad goats. The sin is not in being a certain kind of animal. In Ezekiel the sheep were committing the sin of greed. And in Matthew the goats were leaving out the virtue of charity. But whether we are committing sins or omitting virtues, it doesn't matter whether we are leaders or followers, brilliant or stupid, sheep or goats. We're talking about actions.

The Kingdom of God belongs to those who *by their actions* show that they are true children of God. Members of God's family simply look out for the littlest, the weakest, and the least important among them. And in the parable that means feeding the hungry, taking care of the sick, welcoming the stranger, visiting those who are in prison or lonely. It's not whether we intend to, or know somebody who does, or have made a

plan to fit something like that into our schedule next month or next year. It's not about an occasional act of kindness. It's about the direction and purpose of our lives, and who we include in our circle of care.

Jesus does not ask us to do anything complicated or hard. We don't have to actually cure the sick, rehabilitate the prison population, or rid the world of sin and evil. All he says is to visit, feed, clothe, and welcome. Show some compassion for the people who are left behind, who have little status in the world. They are our fellow human beings.

Today we celebrate Christ the King Sunday. But Jesus didn't seem to care what people said about him. He didn't care whether people called him Messiah, Lord or King. He didn't care whether people bowed down to him or not. He just wanted to know how people treated their brothers and sisters on this earth, how they had served "the least of these." What we do for "the least of these" shows whether or not we belong in God's Kingdom.

Soon Hee read from the prophet Ezekiel this morning, a message of hope to the people of God living in exile in Babylon. But we didn't read the beginning of the chapter which helps us understand the rest. It starts with a word of judgment against the shepherds or rulers and kings of Israel. "Thus says the Lord God: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings: but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them." (34:2-4). This is aimed at Israel's leaders.

According to the Bible, God is not only concerned with individual acts of charity. God is also concerned with people in power, and how a nation treats its weakest members. Notice who comes before the Son of Man for judgment in the parable from Matthew (vs. 32). It's all *the nations*. We are not only judged as individuals. We are also judged as a nation.

And how does our nation measure up? In our society, the rich have been getting richer while the poor get poorer. We exploit immigrants, neglect our veterans, and pay wages so low that people have to work two or three jobs to support their families, while people with money find ways to spend as much as they want to influence lawmakers. As Ezekiel described it, the fat sheep push with flank and shoulder and scatter the weak. They eat the good parts and clothe themselves, and they rule with force and harshness.

This is not OK with God. Ezekiel also wrote, "I, the Lord, will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice." It's not necessarily bad for people to be strong or to enjoy the fruit of their labor. But it's not OK to exploit or injure people in the process. That's not how things work in God's Kingdom.

How does God "feed people with justice?" It's not about creating more soup kitchens and food pantries and increasing acts of charity. It's about stopping the fat sheep from preying on the weak. It's about gathering the weak and bringing them to a good and rich pasture, where there's enough for everyone to go around, where they are paid fairly and can find some rest. Justice may not taste very good to the fat sheep. In fact, it's a bitter meal. But in God's Kingdom, everyone is fed with justice.

This week is Thanksgiving, and with Thanksgiving, as a nation we begin the season of giving. The season of getting started a while ago with sales and advertisements. I read a story yesterday about a man who set up a tent on November 11<sup>th</sup> outside of Best Buy in Fort Myers, Florida, so he could be first in line to get the Black Friday deals when the doors open at 5 p.m. on Thanksgiving Day. Is there a better way to express our thanksgiving to God, and our joy at the birth of Jesus?

One way is to look out for the least of these, members of God's family. I'm not talking about an isolated act of charity, a can of soup for the Center for Food Action, or a gift to an Oelhaf House resident. Do those things, by all means. They make a difference, and it's a good place to start. But God's Kingdom is much more than isolated acts of charity. It's a whole way of life.

Those of you who pledge money and give to the church on a regular basis have made giving a part of your spiritual practice. Thank you. Those of you who cook and serve for Loaves and Fishes, or volunteer at the Center for Food Action have made feeding the hungry an expected part of your life. Thank you. Those of you who spend the night or cook a meal whenever we volunteer with Family Promise, are helping homeless families who are struggling to put their lives together. Thank you. Those of you who teach English conversation classes, or volunteer with CoFiA, or go out of your way to make guests feel welcome in this church, you are welcoming strangers as a regular part of your life. Thank you. Whenever you work for fair wages, for just immigration policies, for human rights for people who are discriminated against, you are doing it for Jesus. You are feeding and welcoming and caring for the King himself.

These acts of giving and justice don't begin and end in the Christmas season. They are an integral part of who we are as followers of Jesus. We express our thanks to God and joy to our King by giving to the world, and working for justice for those who are in need. And as we give to the least of these, members of God's family, we proclaim Christ as King to the glory of God. Amen.

\* "a Black Friday Campout: A Cherished Ritual, Even Taken to Extremes," by James B. Stewart, The New York Times, Saturday, November 22, 2014, page B1.