



Two weeks ago I went to see a sick friend. Actually he is a dying friend. As I pulled up his long driveway, I was flooded with memories. We had been in a community group together, both of us over 50, yet we decided to learn to water ski together. We looked like Thelma and Louise behind the boat! I had baptized his kids, attended his kids' graduation parties, officiated at their weddings, and dedicated his grandkids. Julie had taught his daughter to dance and gave her roles in our church musicals. The trip up his driveway was likely my last to see my friend this side of heaven.

After parking my car, I glanced over at his barn because I had heard animal noises. My friend raises a few goats and sheep and I heard some bleating and baahing. He always kept his sheep and goats in the same pen. One of his sons was shearing the sheep. I greeted him, but I couldn't help but notice that sheared sheep and goats look very much alike from a distance. It's pretty hard to tell them apart. You have to look closely.

There is a story in Matthew 25:31–46 where Jesus uses sheep and goats to describe two kinds of people that from a distance may be hard to tell apart. You have to look closely. Some say this passage about the sheep and goats is really a parable; some say this passage is really a prophecy. I think it's both.

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left” (verses 31–33).

So what is happening here? Jesus tell us that one day he is going to return in glory. It will be his second coming. He will come that second time, not to save the world but to judge or divide the world. He will look closely and separate people into two camps: the sheep and the goats.

“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world’” (v. 34).

To the sheep he will say, Welcome into my kingdom. Your inheritance, which has been prepared for you from the beginning of the world, waits for you.

“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to

drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’” (verses 35–39).

This is where the audience gets confused by the words of the king. They are saying, yes, we took care of the hungry and the thirsty. We welcomed the lonely into our families. We gave clothes to the people who needed clothes. We comforted the sick. We even visited people who are incarcerated. Yes, Jesus, we even participated in something called LoveWorks at our church! But we never saw you needing food, water, clothes, comfort, or in prison when we did our projects.

“The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me’” (v. 40).

Let's delve a little deeper into this verse. Jesus is saying that he will make his determination whether one is a sheep or a goat based on how we respond to “the least of these.” Verse 40 raises the question: Who are the least of these?

Some scholars say that Jesus is referring in particular to his followers who are poor and needy because of their loyalty to him. Others take a more traditional understanding that Jesus simply refers to all poor and needy in the world. What's crystal clear is that Jesus has in mind people, people who for whatever reason are the most needy and vulnerable.

Another observation from these verses is that when it comes to the last judgment, there are going to be some surprises. Those who he deems as sheep who will be welcomed into heaven seem surprised by what mattered to Jesus. It's as if things we view as minor on earth are actually major things to Jesus. And the things that we view as major on earth are actually minor things to Jesus.

When Jesus says, *“Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me,”* he is expressing his identification with the needy and the vulnerable. He continually expressed his heart for the poor, the sick and the disenfranchised.

What am I saying? I'm saying that Jesus was with CPC'ers this weekend while they were building a BBQ at a home for women who had escaped sex trafficking. I'm saying Jesus was with CPC'ers this weekend while they were ministering with City Impact in the Tenderloin. I'm saying Jesus was with CPC'ers while they were comforting and praying with lonely and elderly shut-ins on the Peninsula. So not only were we connecting with the most needy and vulnerable, but by doing that we were connecting and ministering to Jesus as well.

Even though we didn't gather together to worship Jesus this morning at a particular CPC campus, we were actually worshipping Jesus outside the walls of our church through serving others. And by serving others I am actually serving Jesus. Yes, that is what this passage is saying.

We didn't solve world hunger today. We didn't solve the problems in our inner cities. People will be hungry tomorrow, and they will be lonely tomorrow, and they will feel disenfranchised tomorrow. But we did what we could, where we were, with what we had. And that is what God asks of us.

To say it another way, God expects us to feel what he feels and do what he does for the needy and vulnerable. How many times in the gospels do we read that Jesus was moved with compassion? How many times do we see him stop and relieve someone's suffering? How many times is he disturbed by the exploitation or neglect of people created in his image? And today, Jesus still feels the same way, and he chooses to use us to be his hands and feet and heart.

So what is happening when we fail? What is happening when we don't do good for the least of these? If we turn our backs on the needy it's as if we are turning our backs on Christ. We in essence deny him. We in essence reject him. Choose whatever way to say it you want. When we turn our backs on **them**, we turn our backs on **him**.

Understand, this text is not saying that we are saved by our good works. Jesus is not saying that if we are generous to the poor we'll get into the kingdom. We know from the entirety of

scripture that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, by Christ alone. If we each personally confess with our mouth and believe in our heart that God raised Jesus from the dead, we will be saved. And through that he makes us a new community of sheep. Jesus himself, the good shepherd said, "*Whoever believes in him will not perish but will have eternal life.*"

The passage also tells us that people will be surprised by what matters to Jesus. In fact, if we were to read further, we would learn that verses 41–46 serve as a warning. In those verses, Jesus identifies those who lack compassionate caring for the most needy as evidence of a lack of a saving relationship with Jesus. He calls them goats and pronounces them as unrighteous and subject to eternal judgment.

This parable of the sheep and goats teaches us that true followers of Jesus will show evidence of their faith by feeling what Jesus feels and doing what Jesus does for the most needy and vulnerable. I think for many of us here tonight, it isn't that we don't understand the call of the gospel to serve the needy and most vulnerable. I think we are here tonight because we understand the call of the gospel all too well and we are itching to do this more often, not just on a weekend. We are compelled to do LoveWorks all year long.

I am so grateful to serve alongside so many people who have allowed Jesus to do a work deep in their lives. I am grateful to serve alongside people who are characterized by little often unremembered acts of kindness.

And I am grateful that in God's Story those acts that might be forgotten by us or go unnoticed by others will not be forgotten or go unnoticed by our God.

When we pour out our love to the needy, we are indeed in the presence of Jesus. We are indeed worshipping him. And when we are helping the vulnerable and needy we are more alive than at any other time in our lives.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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