

Green Hill Presbyterian Church  
“Goats and Sheep”  
Thomas G. Speers, III  
November 26, 2017--Christ the King

Lessons: Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Matthew 25:31-46.

Professor Bill Muehl told the story of an eloquent revival preacher who “set out to move his listeners by graphic descriptions of Heaven and the joys it offers the saved. After going on for some time in almost lyrical terms he paused, then asked dramatically, ‘How many of you want to go to Heaven?’

“All hands were raised, save one. Reluctant to lose even a single sinner, the preacher returned to his theme and dwelt upon it with passionate intensity. Then once again he paused and asked, ‘Now how many of you want to go to Heaven?’ Once more all the members of the congregation save one raised their hands.

“Eager to bring the one lost sheep into the fold with all the others, the revivalist finished the service and hastened down into the pews for some personal evangelism.

Approaching the recalcitrant, he asked earnestly, ‘Don’t you want to go to Heaven when you die?’

A look of great relief swept the face of his victim. ‘O sure, Reverend, I want to go to Heaven *when I die,*’ the hold-out replied. ‘But from the way you was carryin’ on, I thought you was gettin’ up a party to leave right away.’”<sup>1</sup>

Most of us, I suspect, would agree with that recalcitrant. We are comforted by the pictures of Heaven that are proclaimed when loved ones die and of course we’d like to go there ourselves when the time comes. However, we are not quite ready to join a party that’s going to leave right away. For this is our home. This is the world we know best. For all the joy we may know one day in Heaven, it is here, on earth, where we live and move and have our being. “Earth is our home, and, with Robert Frost, we ‘don’t know where it’s likely to go better.’” (*Muehl*) Yet, in the words of an old prayer, we are invited to “live as those who are prepared to die,” so that when our days here are ended, we may die as those who go forth to live, so that living or dying our life may be in Jesus Christ our risen Lord. We are invited to live as those who are ready to face the One who sits on the throne and will call us to account for the way we have lived our lives.

Our lessons today suggest in powerful fashion, that God is to be found among the least, the lowliest, the forgotten, the outcast. God is like a shepherd who will care very specially for those weaker sheep. God is like a judge, who will separate the sheep and the goats, according to the service given to God in and through the lives of those who might be called the goats of our society. Now if this image of God as a judge who makes a final separation of sheep and goats worries you, as it sometimes does me, then remember also, that Jesus spent his time amongst those goats, those outcast, those who knew what it was to be separated from the respectable people. Remember that Jesus himself was the victim of human judgement, and experienced the mocking of the crowds. Remember that the judge at the end of time is no less than the Jesus who will save his people from their sins. So when the text speaks about our being judged, remember that we are judged by the One who knows us best and loves us most. We’re judged by the One who wants us to live our lives

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<sup>1</sup> William Muehl, In Our Beginnings is Our End, in *The Living Pulpit*, Vol 8 No. 1 Jan- March 1999. © 1999

most fully. The way to do that is to give ourselves in service to others. In serving the least of our sisters and brothers, we serve Jesus himself. The outcast and the lowly are Christ's designated representatives on earth; in serving them, we serve God. Frankly there is a wonderful mixing up of identities. The sheep are those who go out to serve the goats and are not afraid to be tainted by those goats. In a way the goats finally are treated like sheep and those who run around thinking of themselves as sheep find themselves labeled instead as goats. We are invited to be a sheep among the goats, to be a servant among the outcast.

That isn't necessarily easy; It carries a cost. When you hang around with the less popular, with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, you can get labeled, you can be found guilty by association. Yet remember that the righteous aren't intimidated by the "aura of exclusion" that surrounds the needy. Maybe it is because they recognize that service is the essence of discipleship or maybe they just remember that Jesus himself was accused of being a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners. We are called to serve the least of our sisters and brothers, some of whom may be right here in our midst. Frankly, if you are considering serving someone but you aren't sure if they qualify as being among the least, give them the benefit of the doubt. Serve God by serving them.

And this call to service is not just for individuals; it is also for nations. In Matthew it says, "When the Son of Man comes in his glory,...he will sit on the throne...[and] all the *nations* will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another." We will be held accountable as a nation. In recent weeks, there has been a lot of talk about budgets in Washington and I'm going to leave it for you to judge those budgets, but I will point out what the Scripture says: we are judged by how we as individuals and how we as a nation serve the hungry, the thirsty, the sick, the stranger and prisoners who are in jail. That is important for us not just in the here and now, but also for the hereafter. How well do the sheep of our nation serve among the goats, among the least of our sisters and brothers? Are we ready to stand before the judge to make account for our lives and for the life of our nation? The way we care for the least of these is one way we prepare for the reign of Christ.

Bill Phillippe, a retired Presbyterian minister, writes about one of the most embarrassing things that happened to him when he and his wife came back through customs after a trip they took to England. "Now we have traveled a good bit, some of it in the 'gamier' parts of the world. We've been through all kinds of customs stations, and I have been asked time and again, 'What have you to declare?' Mostly they take your word for it, but in the United States, they don't. Here they do search your baggage, especially if you tell them that in the box labeled on the outside in bold letters, 'Kentucky Fried Chicken,' you have a Victorian coal bucket.

"So it was suitcase time for me, and then before the eyes of the waiting crowd the agent proceeds to hold up my dainties for inspection. And let me tell you, the most startling discovery was when this male found that his wife had stashed some of her dainties in *my* luggage!

"Well I got to dreaming about that one night not long ago, and my dream went a little farther. I wondered how it would go when we come at the last great frontier, and the customs inspector of all customs inspectors asks that question, 'What have you to declare?'

"How embarrassing it will be for some who will stand at those gates and have to declare that they were dull-eyed travelers in this world, that all they can declare after their trip of life is \$402,649 or, if they are from a lower income bracket, \$10,264 and a secondhand car. As these poor slobbs stand before the celestial customs officer with their

battered suitcases of life, all they will be able to declare is a little tinsel from the five-and-dime of life.

“But some will be able to say with Paul, ‘I declare the whole wide world.’ For I have allowed myself to be used in the service of the creator of the world. As I have traveled through the earth, I used the great percentage of my life to bring the words of life to others. So I declare this soul and that soul. This one fed and that one clothed. This one given a cup of cold water, this one visited in the prison of torment. This one picked up and loved...’

“And the celestial customs inspector will say, ‘Well done, good and faithful traveler; enter into the Promised Land.’”<sup>2</sup>

Serve God by serving others, especially the least among our sisters and brothers. Be a sheep among the goats, that one day you might declare the whole wide world before the throne of grace.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus Christ, help us to recognize your presence in and among the faces of need that surround us. Give us the courage to serve you in serving them. We pray to your honor and glory. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> William R. Phillippe, *A Stewardship Scrapbook*. Geneva Press. © 1999