

Matthew 25:31-46
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Seeing Jesus

In *The Twible*, which includes every chapter of the Bible in 140 characters or less, chapter 25 of Matthew's gospel reads:

Calling all sheep! All sheep, head this way to heaven! Thanks for feeding and clothing the poor. PS Sorry, goats, you're on your own.¹

This parable—and yes, I think it's a parable, more about that in a minute—gives me flashbacks to choosing up teams for kickball or battle-ball—my elementary school's name for dodgeball. Choosing teams is awful, isn't it? Or at least it was. No one wants to be chosen last, and no one wants to wind up on the bad team, the losing team. In other words, no one wants to be a goat, at least not like the ones in this parable.

And yes, I called this story a parable. It does not begin the way our other parables have this season; it does not say “the kingdom of heaven is like...” and yet it is puzzling. And scholar Stanley Saunders has persuaded me that it is in fact a parable. He writes:

The question has to do with whether [the passage] points to the nature of God's reign and subverts the audience's way of looking at the world, as in most of Jesus' parables, or [the passage] merely depicts in a straightforward way Jesus' vision of the final judgment. If the story catches its readers in the quest to identify with the 'least ones,' it is a parable—a sting aimed at Matthew's audience.²

¹ Matthew 25 from *Twible* by Jana Riess, as cited here: <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/narrative-notes/1-35>

² Stanley P. Saunders, *Preaching the Gospel of Matthew*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010) 258.

Like the 1973 movie *The Sting*, Saunders understands this grand scene to be a trap of sorts, a sting to catch those who might get distracted by trying to put ourselves on Team Sheep or Team Least of These, while maybe even assigning others to Team Goat.

I remember reading in this congregation's history that one of my predecessors preached two Sundays in a row trying to convince the congregation to give up sitting in your favorite spot every week. (Spoiler alert: it didn't work.) I spoke with a colleague this past week who told me about a lovely congregation that opens its doors and shares its sanctuary with other congregations, one on Saturday mornings and one on Sunday evenings. The only request they made was that the guests sit on one side of the sanctuary when they attended for worship because the home congregation liked leaving their bibles, shawls and Kleenex boxes in their pews. We like our spot. We like to know where we fit. We like to think and believe that we are doing our faithful best. And we really want to peg ourselves as among the sheep in this text or even as a little one who has been fed or visited or tended to. Another pastor mentioned online this past week that he was going to make a joke about this side being the sheep and this side being the goats. Take note dear Jim Holderness, that might actually get people to switch seats, but that joke also puts me in the role of the Son of Man passing judgment on the masses, and even I am not bold enough to pretend that I am worthy to play that part, even as a joke.

And I'm not sure dividing up into teams is really the point of this text. Dr. Saunders points out that our breathless efforts to try and put ourselves on the right, God-pleasing team are futile because we live in the land of hindsight. The sheep serve the least without promise of reward or hope of pleasing the King of Heaven. And they do not see Jesus among the little ones, any more than the goats do. We can't unknow this story. The church has heard this story for

generations. We can't pretend that we're not supposed to see Christ in the least of these. We know better or at least more than the sheep and the goats in the story, which means we cannot be these sheep. Ugh. And I really don't like the sound of that place with the fire and the flames and the weeping and the teeth.

This parable serves as a bookend to the Sermon on the Mount:

'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.'³

Fast forward twenty or so chapters, and we find ourselves here. This passage comes toward the end of Jesus' life. In the timeline of Matthew's gospel, Palm Sunday has passed and in the verses that follow ours, the religious leaders will begin to plot and conspire with Rome to get Jesus out of the way. This one whom crowds have just celebrated and heralded as a king will be betrayed, arrested, starved, imprisoned, stripped, beaten, and killed in a matter of days. Not one of his disciples will visit him or bring him food or clothes or come to his aid in any way. Before their very eyes, Jesus will be the least of these in every way, and they will not seek him out. They will scatter in fear and do their best to save their own skins. They will line up with the goats, it seems.

³ Matthew 5:5-11, New Revised Standard Version, updated edition (NRSVue)

This passage is written down years later, of course. The fledgling church, Matthew's immediate audience faces Roman oppression at every turn along with conflict and division from within the community itself. Throughout this gospel Matthew's Jesus has spelled out high expectations for the church. We and they do not and cannot save ourselves; only God can do that. Because of God's saving grace, we are welcomed into the body of Christ, into the family of faith, and love of God and love of neighbor are the linchpins of that community. I wonder if it was easy to forget that then. I wonder if the early church got distracted, too.

The Kansas State men's basketball team is not on my family's list of favorites currently since they defeated the Kentucky Wildcats last weekend. If I'm honest they are probably on our own True family goat list. (Their loss last night may help ease the sting a bit.) They did provide one play that grabbed my attention, however. The point guard dribbled across center court and squabbled with the head coach about which play to run next. While everyone was distracted by this mini-drama, another Kansas State player snuck to the basket and dunked a perfectly timed alley-oop from the point guard. The defense was so preoccupied with the squabbling, they took their eyes off the ball and they missed the player moving to the basket.

It is so easy to get distracted. It is so easy to take my eye off the ball, to lose sight of Jesus. It is so easy for me to craft Jesus into who or what I want him to be. It is so easy for me to see him where I want to see him. I sense that this parable is calling us back from the distractions we so easily embrace and is pushing us on our ministry with the least of these. I sense that Jesus is pushing us to see him for who he truly is, too. Most artistic depictions of this scene are gilded and glittering with angels and a shiny Christ on a golden throne, like an earthly king writ large. These paintings and mosaics are beautiful, and they are safe and they are

perhaps a bit distracting. Jesus is not parked on a throne surrounded by glitter and gold. No, this parable insists that he is among the hungry, the imprisoned, the forgotten and overlooked and that neither the sheep nor the goats see him in there. Do we? In the past I have wondered about this scene as a cosmic episode of “Undercover Boss,” where Jesus is about to pop up from behind the counter or from his dingy sleeping bag tucked behind a building on Union Street, but I think his counting himself among the little ones is more profound than that. Maybe it’s not about my receiving a pat on the head or a gold star to show Jesus and everyone else how sheep-y I am. Maybe it’s about taking Jesus at his word that I’ve failed to see him in the one sleeping on a piece of cardboard on the steps of the education building, wandering downtown asking for some change to get a meal or gas for his car, or playing—or pretending to play—a violin for handouts at Food Lion, because he’s not hiding. I just don’t see him. Instead I tend to duck my head and move to the other side of the street, all while worrying about whether I’ve done enough to get on the right team, whether I’ve scored enough points to line up with the sheep, and fretting about who I think should be on that other list. And then I hear Dr. Saunders insist:

This parable ultimately subverts our attempts to render the world into categories of good and bad, righteous and unrighteous, weak and powerful. Disciples who engage this text honestly are likely to find themselves somewhere between the sheep and the goats. This parable is not meant to grant certainty to any of Jesus’ disciples, but to make us watchful, attending carefully, faithfully, and creatively to Christ’s presence among the least of our [siblings] God’s empire belongs not to the self-proclaimed righteous

ones, but to those who continually hunger and thirst for God's righteousness, which leads not to certainty, but to the cross.⁴

So yes, I guess I fall somewhere between the sheep and the goats because it is easier to distract myself into choosing up sides and keeping score and squabbling than it is to follow Jesus and watch my savior lie cold, beaten, forgotten, and hungry in a jail cell let alone see him die on a cross.

And yet, as puzzling as it is to fathom and as hard as it is to believe, this same king does not give up on me. He does not say, "Ellen, you're a goat, and you're on your own!" Instead he calls to me with urgency to keep looking, to see him not only on a shiny throne but also in the least and the lost. Jesus pleads with me, with us to work for a church and a world that honors and makes room for the most other of others without worrying about getting credit or being the teacher's pet. And by the grace of God, this same shepherd-king still promises to save us, to save me, no matter how goat-like I may be, to love me into letting go of my distracted, squabbling, battle-ball ways. Walking with him will not put me at the head of the class. In fact if I truly follow where he leads, I will wind up at the cross with him. And through it all, he promises to shepherd me and every last, least, and lost one home where all are fed, all are clothed, all are welcomed, all are healed, and all are free, not because of who we are, but because of who he is and always will be.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁴ Saunders, 261.