

Is That You?
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
April 1, 2019

Matthew 25: 31-46

Two weeks ago, I was at home with Clark on my day off cleaning up the chicken coop when a beat up blue four door pulled in to one of the parking spots near the house. The driver told us he was looking for help, that he was out of work and hungry and didn't live in town so social services wouldn't assist.

The man was slurring his words a little and talked about how he heard that the pastor was pretty and nice, which felt kind of creepy. He told us that he likes to come to the wealthy suburban churches because they were the ones with money. Then he asked if we knew when the church office would be open? He tried the office door and found it was locked.

Clark said no, the church office isn't open, but he could come back when it would be open at 8:30 am on Monday.

I recognized the driver because he came by the office just few weeks before, and a couple of weeks before that, and a month before that looking for help. Each time there was a unique reason for his visit: He needed groceries. He was short some rent money. He had an empty gas tank and had to get to a funeral.

But on that day, I was home, off the clock with no cash in my wallet. So I hid behind the chicken coop, reluctant to be recognized. I don't want his visits to the house to become a habit. We have a special needs child, and I did not want her to become scared.

Clark sent him away with an "We cannot help you today and you need to leave." In that moment, I sure did feel guilty. Like a hypocrite. It's literally my JOB to care for the least of these. But I blew it that time. So, what does that make me, a goat? Accursed? Bound for the eternal fires of punishment? I don't know.

The first time he came by the church a couple of years ago I said to him, "You are always welcome here. Let me get you some food. How can I help you? What do you need? Let's pray before you go..."

So, was I a good sheep back then? Righteous? Blessed by the Father? Bound for eternal life? I don't know.

I'll bet each of you has a story just like mine;
a time when you fed, clothed, visited, cared for one of the least of these,
and another time when you drove past, looked away, were in a hurry,
or pretended not to see.

I could list the reasons why I helped one day, and not another.
I could defend and justify my choices in a reasonable debate.
And some of my explanations would be based on what I perceived this
guy's story, his life, his circumstances to be.

I think we all want to make a difference in the life of another, in the world,
in the church. Maybe that's why we sometimes struggle figuring out who to
help and how. We don't want to cause additional harm, or a dependency.
Deep down we really do want to do what's right.

And I have found over the years that sometimes, the least of these is not
necessarily who I think they are going to be...

They are the people over whom I have some sense of power and control.
They are the ones who have less resources and options than do I.
They are the ones overwhelmed by life and underwhelmed by support.
They are the ones who feel they are hanging on by a thread and they look at
me like I'm holding the scissors.
They are the ones I might threaten or intimidate simply because of who I
am, what I have, and what I am able to do.

Who are the least of these in your life?

The people gathered for judgment in today's gospel lesson have no idea
what difference they are making in the world, they are just going on about
their lives. One cared for the least of these and the other didn't. They seem
oblivious as to the consequences or effects of their actions. They both ask
Jesus the same question. "*When did we see you?*"

Let's not literalize this story. Let's not make this into a search for the least of
these so we can be all good and get on the fast-track to heaven. Let's not
start tallying and keeping score of how many people we helped and how
many we passed by, overlooked, or said no to.

How do we measure that anyway? What's a passing grade, 70%? Can we
plot it on a bell curve? Or do we just total up the two columns at the end of
our life and see which is greater, cared for or didn't care for?

I just don't think that's what today's gospel is about, that's too easy.
We already know we should help and care for one another. As Nils offered in

this week's Bible study, caring for our neighbors is a basic tenet of not only our faith, but our society as a whole. Or, at least it should be.

Maybe the goat and sheep metaphor worked in Jesus' day, but I don't think it makes much sense to us today. Maybe this story is just meant to push us to look to the truth of our lives, to look at the choices we make, and to be aware that they matter - not just for us but also for another human being.

I think this story names the reality in which we live. It's a reality that pulls us in different directions. It's one in which we often contradict ourselves.

When the disciples wanted to find fish in the shallows, they were trying to avoid making an effort or taking a risk. That's when Jesus told them they wouldn't find what they were looking for until they cast out into the deep waters (Luke 5:4).

When Jesus pointed out the hypocrisy of sinners stoning a woman for a crime whose severity paled in comparison to their sin of blood-lust, he reminded them that only God can judge (John 8), and God's judgment isn't of this earth.

That guy I told you about - the one who came to the church office, the one I helped at first, the one we later ran off when he parked at our house - I don't know the truth of his life, and I don't need to. It's enough that he has shown me the truth of my life. He served as a reminder that I have a choice between serving in the light and standing in the shadow. We all do.

The truth, in my experience, is that some days we're sheep, and other days we're goats. The same holds true about our worst enemies that we're convinced are full time goats. It's also true about our heroes we think are 'sheep of the year'. As one writer put it, "to be human is to be spectacularly generous and wonderful. But to be human is also to make mistakes, and to not do the things we know we should do."

How God works it all out in the final judgment is not my job, thank goodness. I'm grateful to know that God does care about injustice, and calls us to task over the ways we might ignore the needs of our neighbors. The simple truth is that we love God by loving others. It matters. So what will we choose? And who will we be? Amen.