

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

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Of Sheep and Goats Based on Matthew 25:31-46

I have to confess that when I hear the story of the Fully Human One, in an act of judgement, separating sheep and goats, it makes me squirm. Because as much as I believe that I am a generous person, as much as I try to follow the teachings of Jesus, I'm a goat. In a world full of hungry and homeless people, I might help a few, but most I walk on by. In a world where many are sick and impoverished, I confine myself to my armchair in front of the TV. In a world where so many end up in prison, I have not visited them. I know it can be done, because I know others who do. But thus far, I have not. I am a goat. It is hard to live in this world without being a goat. It is a goat kind of world. And perhaps to me as well, the words of Jesus apply: "These will go away into eternal punishment, but the generous and compassionate will enter into eternal life." This passage makes me squirm. It is harsh in its distinction, its judgement between good and evil, compassion and callousness.

But along with its harshness, there is also hope. We live in a goat kind of world. But we also live in a sheep kind of world. A world where everyday people like you and I, and committed communities, are making a difference. A world where collectively, we can be the church, the sheep who follow the shepherd, the sheep that the scripture says have such an intimate relationship with Jesus that he knows us by name.

And we have the power to choose who we are going to align ourselves with: sheep or goats. We have the power to choose who we want to be. The story tells that the Fully Human One gathers "the nations" before him. The nations, in Greek, is *ta ethne*, a phrase that meant, in the Jewish context, the non-Jewish peoples, the Gentiles. This is not an individual judgement, but a collective one. It is a judgement about the kind of communities we live in. Of course we can't meet every human need ourselves, and God is not so harsh as to expect us to do what we simply are incapable of doing. I may not visit prisons very often, but my colleague Fran Hare does, and recently some of you heard about the book club that she leads in Bowden Institution. You may not feed the hungry directly, but you were with me in Spirit this past week when I met a woman fleeing domestic violence at the grocery store and helped her stock her fridge. Perhaps you haven't personally visited anyone sick recently, but there is a small dedicated group of people in this congregation who visit in the nursing homes and lodges and hospital regularly. Perhaps you don't personally work with the homeless,

but you support Safe Harbour and other groups that do. Perhaps you don't have much to do with any of the needy mentioned in Jesus' list, but you joyfully pay taxes that help to make our society one in which there are many supports for those who need a helping hand. We don't all have to do everything, but when we do something, our actions become a part of a community of compassion, and the balance tips toward the sheep side of the ledger.

This passage from the book of Matthew is a challenging one though. It is a call to radical discipleship and uncomfortable relationship. A love that goes above and beyond. It's never been easy to be a sheep who strives to follow a shepherd like Jesus. It's demanding.

Yet that's our Christian call. It is the missional call of our church to care for the least as though Jesus' life hangs in the balance -because it does.

There are, of course, many different ways to help people. There is an old saying that if you give a man a fish, you feed him for a day. If you teach him to fish, you feed him for a lifetime. But what if the man knows how to fish, but has no access to a fishing hole? People are often poor, not because they are ignorant or lazy, but because they have no power to change their lives.

Some of the different ways to help people are expressed through the symbol of a wheel (slide). At the hub of the wheel is our faith response, our desire to do good. The rim of the wheel is actually living in compassionate ways. The spokes of the wheel are how we get from wanting to do good, to actually doing it. There are four spokes and all of them are important.

The upper vertical spoke, charity, is when we give money or goods, but often don't have a lot of contact with the people who are the recipients of our giving. Charity is giving a man a fish. Charity is often our first response to those in need, and it is important in certain contexts, especially in crisis situations where people just need help to survive for a short period of time. But charity can create dependency, which can actually be counterproductive in others. Those who work with the poor and homeless have often encouraged me to avoid giving money to beggars on the streets. That money often goes to alcohol or drugs,



and can be much more effectively used if it was given to organizations that actually help the poor. If charity were the only spoke of the wheel, we wouldn't get very far.

Another spoke is service. Service is when we do something that gives us direct, face-to-face contact with people. Service is teaching a man to fish. Again, service can be important, but again, the relationship flows one way. The benefactor decides what to do for the recipient. So service can be a means of avoiding relationship, and it sometimes reinforces the imbalance of power between those with means and those without.

The third spoke, advocacy, is when we speak on behalf of someone or help them speak for themselves. Perhaps it means accompanying someone to visit a social worker or the utility company, or writing a letter to the editor. But the first step in advocacy is deep and careful listening, understanding clearly what people need and want. It lends our power to help others communicate their needs and situation.

The fourth spoke, justice, is when we work for change in the systems that affect peoples' lives. Justice requires us to understand why people are poor, unemployed or marginalized. It requires a social analysis, and a strategy for making change. And so I am glad that we have people in our congregation that are passionate advocates for justice, people who write letters and support organizations like the Central Alberta Poverty Reduction Alliance.

All of these spokes are important if we are to really make true and lasting change in people's lives. Sometimes charity is enough. Sometimes service can make a real difference. Sometimes people need an advocate and sometimes they need people who are willing to engage systems and work for change. As a community, we have to be willing to do all of these things. In order to know what the poor need and how to help them, we need to take ourselves out of the role of saviour and benefactor and seek to learn from those we want to help. We need to learn how they see their situation and what factors keep them poor. Only when we use all four spokes of the wheel, can we really respond to the poor with compassion and solidarity.

When we move past a simple charity response, to building relationships with people, one of the things we discover is that we also gain a great deal ourselves. We have a sense of having encountered something truly holy. We discover in our relationships of compassion and solidarity that we are not just entering into relationship with other people, but are meeting the Christ who is present in the least of these.