

Our Kinship

Ezekiel 34: 11-16, 20-24

Matthew 25:31-46

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Ezekiel 34: 11-16, 20-24

For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

Therefore, thus says the Lord God to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep. I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the Lord, have spoken.

Matthew 25: 31-46

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you

did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

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You would think that sheep and goats are pretty easy to tell apart. Sheep are woolly, goats are not. A sheep’s tail hangs down but a goat's tail points up. Sheep tend to be meek, serene, and friendly, while goats tend to be cheeky, independent, and adventurous. Goats have slightly bigger noses and ears, as well as -of course- sometimes a goatee. With this obvious distinction between the two types of animals it is easy to assume that sorting them is a simple, straightforward task. A casual glance is all it should take to tell the difference. It’s easy to understand the images in this gospel story as symbolic. The sheep are the type to be together, to be aware of those around them, and to respond. The goats are independent, they’re off doing their own thing so stubbornly oblivious to what is happening around them. But there is more than that.

Physically there are actually times when it can be almost impossible to tell sheep and goats apart. A former pastorⁱ told of trip to Israel that included driving through a remote hillside when he came upon a band of Bedouin tents. From a distance he could see a herd of either sheep *or* goats around the tents. From where he was, the sheep and goats looked very much alike. As he approached this Bedouin camp, he could then see that the sheep had been recently sheered of their wool. When the sheep were sheered, the sheep actually looked very much like the goats. Only once he was up close could he definitely see which ones were sheep and which were goats.

I would never have imagined that at times it could be hard to distinguish one from the other unless you happen to be up close. Perhaps that is true for you as well. But this awareness says quite a bit about Jesus on the throne of glory separating the sheep from the goats, the right from the left, the compassionate from the oblivious, the caring from the unconcerned, the blessed from the punished.

Jesus sees us up close. Up close and personal. Jesus is up close to us and knows whether or not our hearts are empathetic and responsive like the sheep in this story or if our hearts are untouched and indifferent like the goats in this story. Jesus is up close to us and can see if we are sincerely responding in the ways of the One we call Lord, we call King, or if we do not recognize Christ the King incognito. ‘What if God was one of us.... just a stranger on the bus?’ Joan Osborneⁱⁱ asked.

On this church calendar day we celebrate the Kingship of Christ, the reign of Christ. Today is the last Sunday of the Christian Year before we again anticipate the coming of Christ in Advent, his birth in the most humblest of places, his ministry of healing the most vulnerable, his welcoming the marginalized, his feeding the hungry on the hillsides and at the Communion table, the outwitting of his adversaries, his seeking the lost and the strayed, teaching us all how to pray, the One who was whipped, stripped and nailed to a cross, who was resurrected in a stone-sealed tomb and who ascended to heavenly glory as the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. And yet I wonder if the One who flipped the tables of understanding power and prestige, who rode into Jerusalem on a donkey and whose crown was woven of thorns, is not far more interested in our *kinship* than his kingship.

Jesus sees the hungry, the hurting, the hopeless, the helpless. Jesus spent time with the unwanted, the overlooked, the forgotten. Kings live among only the ‘important people’ but the King of Kings lived among the unimportant. Kings have wealth, gold and jewels. Jesus is not interested in comfort or personal security. Kings have castles. Jesus was an itinerant preacher and teacher. In John’s gospelⁱⁱⁱ, Jesus is clear, “My kingdom is not of this world.”

Fr. Greg Boyle, a Jesuit priest and the founder and director of Homeboy Industries in south central Los Angeles, the world's largest gang intervention and rehabilitation center states, “Kinship: not serving the other, but being one with the other. Jesus was not ‘a man for others’ he was one with them. There is a world of difference in that.”^{iv}

Jesus sees each of us up close and personal, sees how we are genuinely with others, sees the kinship we choose to live with or not. Kinship, relationship, connectedness, says ‘we’re all in this together.’

Political and labor activist Eugene V. Debs wrote, “Years ago I recognized my kinship with all living things, and I made up my mind that I was not one bit better than the meanest on the earth. I said then and I say now, that while there is a lower class, I am in it; while there is a criminal element, I am of it; while there is a soul in prison, I am not free.”^v

On the day when Jesus will clearly see and separate the sheep to the right and the goats to the left, the question will be asked by sheep and goats alike.

‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty? And when was it that we saw you a stranger or naked? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison?’

And Jesus will reply, “I was there. You just didn’t see me.”

The sheep will be completely surprised, perhaps even humbled. Having acted with sincere, genuine, and faithful compassion as Jesus would, they would have not expected to have cared for Jesus himself. The goats though will be defensive, wishing they had known. “But Lord if we’d known it was you, we would have acted differently. We would have treated you like the king you are!”

Which is just what Jesus doesn’t want. He wants them to treat everybody else as they would treat him. And so, Christ the King has come to us disguised as those who are hungry, thirsty, naked, strangers, sick, and imprisoned. He has identified with them so closely that the way we treat them is the way we treat him, and what he is watching for, always, is whether or not we will see the need before us and respond with compassion.

‘What if God was one of us.... just a stranger on the bus?’ Amen.

ⁱ https://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/christ_the_king_sheep_and_goats.htm

ⁱⁱ Joan Osborne. *One of Us*.

ⁱⁱⁱ John 18:36

^{iv} Greg Boyle. *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*

^v Eugene V. Debs. *Debs: His Life, Writings and Speeches*