

Matthew 25:31–46 (The Message)

“When he finally arrives, blazing in beauty and all his angels with him, the Son of Man will take his place on his glorious throne. Then all the nations will be arranged before him and he will sort the people out, much as a shepherd sorts out sheep and goats, putting sheep to his right and goats to his left.

“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Enter, you who are blessed by my Father! Take what’s coming to you in this kingdom. It’s been ready for you since the world’s foundation. And here’s why:

I was hungry and you fed me,
I was thirsty and you gave me a drink,
I was homeless and you gave me a room,
I was shivering and you gave me clothes,
I was sick and you stopped to visit,
I was in prison and you came to me.’

“Then those ‘sheep’ are going to say, ‘Master, what are you talking about? When did we ever see you hungry and feed you, thirsty and give you a drink? And when did we ever see you sick or in prison and come to you?’ Then the King will say, ‘I’m telling the solemn truth: Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me—you did it to me.’

“Then he will turn to the ‘goats,’ the ones on his left, and say, ‘Get out, worthless goats! You’re good for nothing but the fires of hell. And why? Because—

I was hungry and you gave me no meal,
I was thirsty and you gave me no drink,
I was homeless and you gave me no bed,
I was shivering and you gave me no clothes,
Sick and in prison, and you never visited.’

“Then those ‘goats’ are going to say, ‘Master, what are you talking about? When did we ever see you hungry or thirsty or homeless or shivering or sick or in prison and didn’t help?’

“He will answer them, ‘I’m telling the solemn truth: Whenever you failed to do one of these things to someone who was being overlooked or ignored, that was me—you failed to do it to me.’

“Then those ‘goats’ will be herded to their eternal doom, but the ‘sheep’ to their eternal reward.”

The Least of These

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

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Scripture: Matthew 25:31-46

Who is Jesus talking to? Who are the sheep, and who are the goats? And who was Jesus talking about? Who are the overlooked and the ignored? Or as the more literal translation in the New Revised Standard Version in your pew Bibles puts it, who are “the least of these”?

The answers to the questions seem straightforward enough. The sheep do the right things, and the goats don't. Okay, sheep go to the right; goats go to the left. Sheep you inherit the kingdom. Sorry goats, you are accursed; you burn in the eternal fire.

The differences between the sheep and the goats? The sheep fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, sheltered the homeless, clothed the naked, and visited the sick and imprisoned. The goats, well they didn't do these things. Sheep to the right, goats to the left.

But who are these hungry, thirsty, naked, homeless, sick and imprisoned people? Seems pretty obvious to me. They're lots of people. Some of them may attend the Outdoor Church. Some may live next door to us. Some of us may be them. The text is pretty clear.

But, believe it or not, Biblical scholars have spent endless pages arguing over just these questions. Is Jesus addressing his own followers, or is he talking to anyone who happens to be listening, who happens to have joined the crowd today? Is this a moral code for Christians or everybody? Scholars are divided. But it gets really contentious when they try to figure out who are “the least of these,” who are the ones whom Jesus' listeners are supposed to take care of.

Many, perhaps most scholars are pretty sure that Jesus is telling the people to take care of his followers. In other words Jesus is saying to take care of the members of the Christian movement, fellow Christians. The text says, “The least of these, my brothers and sisters.” Many experts are convinced that the admonition to care is meant to cover just church members.

Read that way, readers of Matthew don't have to worry about Jews or Hindus, or atheists, either. Maybe, if we're Protestants, we don't have to worry about Catholic or Orthodox Christians. Maybe if we're UCC, we don't have to worry about Episcopalians or Baptists, either. Maybe Matthew means that charity begins at home. Gosh, maybe Matthew means we don't have to worry about anyone except the members of North Prospect Union Church. Forget the giving tree. Get it out of the narthex. Forget the Outdoor Church. Get this food for the food pantry out of my sight. We need to take care of our little group.

Well, maybe the Biblical experts think that's what the Bible says, but everyone knows better, don't they? Or do they? Or do we? Does not the question haunt us even today? How big is the circle that decides who gets fed and clothed and housed and who doesn't, who gets safe drinking water and who is worth compassion?

Are undocumented immigrants inside the circle, or are they undeserving criminals, outside the circle, so we don't have to worry about them? How about the chronically unemployed or under-employed? Are they inside the circle, or are they responsible for their own failures and living off our hard-earned tax dollars as it is? Is trying to raise the minimum wage just an exercise in giving undeserved handouts? What about people hungry in other nations? Or

what about workers in other parts of the world who work in unsafe conditions and small wages to keep our prices down? Are any of these “the least of these” that we have to worry about?

Maybe the experts aren’t the only ones who think “the least of these” means some people but not others. Maybe the thinking that some deserve compassion more than others is more widespread than we might at first believe. Maybe life is supposed to be the way some of the experts read this passage; maybe it’s okay to care about some people and not others.

Well, I’ll leave the arguments over the nuances of the Greek to the scholars. As interesting as it is, it, in this case, may miss the point of the larger narrative. The more I read this story, the more I think Jesus means to mislead his hearers, and maybe the experts to. I think Jesus may be doing what he often does. I think he may be setting us up. I think Jesus may be using our own inclinations against us, getting us going in one direction, only to jerk us in the other direction.

Listen to the opening descriptions. “[B]lazing in beauty and all his angels with him, the Son of Man will take his place on his glorious throne.” “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Enter, you who are blessed by my Father!’

I was hungry and you fed me,
I was thirsty and you gave me a drink,
I was homeless and you gave me a room,
I was shivering and you gave me clothes,
I was sick and you stopped to visit,
I was in prison and you came to me.’

When I was a boy, I loved learning magic tricks. Some tricks just worked because of math, I think. I used to do one where I would take part of a deck of cards. I would have someone pick a card, any card. I would shuffle it back into the deck. Then I would deal the cards face up into three piles. The person would tell me in which pile their card was. I would pick up the cards, put that pile in the middle and deal them again. After the third time that the person showed me the pile their card was in and I had reassembled the deck, I would count down a certain number of cards, pull out the card and say, “Is this your card?” It worked every time, and I had no idea why. They were amazed, and so was I. If someone has a deck of cards, I’ll try to show it to you after church.

Anyway, tricks like this were amazing. But the really challenging tricks required more of the magician. To make the more challenging tricks work, I had to make people believe they saw something they didn’t really see. One that I used to do involved placing two different bills, like a dollar and a 5\$ bill one on top of the other at a 90 degree angle. Then I would roll the bills almost all the way up, leaving a corner of each bill exposed. Then I would have an audience member hold a finger on the exposed corner each bill so neither bill could move. Then I’d unroll the bills, voila, the bottom bill was now on top. The trick worked like many magic tricks do. It depended on a sleight of hand. It required a distraction so that the audience was looking at the wrong thing at a crucial moment.

Well, this is just what Jesus did. He’s set them up. He got them looking in one direction: Blazing in glory. Son of man. King. The son of man, the king was hungry and you fed him. The king was thirsty and you gave him drink. He was homeless and you housed him, naked and you clothed him, sick or in prison and you visited him. They are incredulous. “No, we never did,” they say. We would remember feeding and clothing the King of Glory. We would remember taking the Son of Man into our home. Sleight of hand. He’s got them looking for what they expected—blazing glory, son of man on the throne, the King—and then, voila, he springs the

trick. “Whenever you did one of these things to someone who was overlooked or ignored, that was me,” he says.

The trick worked for two reasons. First, Jesus distracted them, got them looking in the wrong place. But it also because of what they already believed. In the trick I told you about the two bills changing places, there were two parts that made it work. One was the distraction, getting the audience to look the wrong way at a critical moment. The other was that the audience member had fingers on both bills assuring they couldn’t move. The audience member was dead certain that the bills couldn’t change position if their fingers were holding them down. But they were wrong. The audience member was convinced that something was true that simply wasn’t.

Jesus spent a good part of his ministry trying to get his followers to see that things were not as they appeared, especially when it came to who was important and who wasn’t. His followers were dead certain that the important ones, the ones you should care for and associate with, were landowners, who threw banquets; religious leaders, who were upright and recognized; or were a Messiah who come on the wings of glory, a saving King sitting on a throne.

And yet time and again he told them that the meek would inherit the earth and that they could drink the cup he would drink, but that the cup he would drink would be bitter. He told them that ignominy and shame would be his lot, not a throne. Jesus spent much of his ministry with those cast out from his society—the ill and infirm, the tax collectors, the poor and the prostitutes—and time and again he preferred them to the high and mighty. And yet even his closest followers kept looking heavenward or to a throne to find him. Despite all he had told them, they were dead certain that Jesus would appear to them as the glorious king. And so he let them think so. He tells the story, “The king came in blazing glory and beauty and all his angels with him, the Son of Man took his place on his glorious throne.” He played right along with them. They know who the king is.

Then he says to the sheep that they fed him and housed him and healed him and visited him. And they say, “No, we would have recognized the king of glory.” He reels them in. He sets them up. And then he springs the trick. He has switched the order of the bills. Those they thought were on the bottom were now on top. He says to them that Son of Man, the Son of Man whom they have helped—or not—is to be found among the overlooked and the ignored. His listeners were looking one way, they were also holding fast to what they were sure was true, and under their eyes he reversed the bills.

Jesus’ hearers must have been stunned and bewildered, like an audience in the hands of a good magician. But here’s the difference. The magician does his tricks to get you to believe the impossible. Jesus tells his story, does his trick, if you will, to demonstrate the truth of the improbable. When you saw someone who was overlooked or ignored, that was me. Amen.