

Lectionary 34 A
Are We the Sheep?

November 26, 2023
Matthew 25:31-46

Are we the sheep in Jesus' parable? We hope so. The sheep inherit the kingdom that was prepared before the world began. The sheep receive eternal life. Their future is certainly better than the eternal fire that the goats received. We want to be the sheep.

God's people are often called "sheep." The Psalm for the Day ends with:

... we are the people of God's pasture
and the **sheep** of God's hand.¹

Psalm 100 has these lines:

... we are God's people
and the **sheep** of God's pasture.²

God's people are called "sheep." Sometimes, like in our First Reading, there are good sheep and bad sheep; actually fat sheep (the bad ones) and lean sheep (the good ones). There are lost sheep in other texts.

I know of no text where God's people are called "goats." Historically, a shepherd's flock often included both sheep and goats. There were times a shepherd would separate the two animals, for instance, when it was time to shear the sheep for their wool. There is such a separation in this parable.

The "sheep" in the parable are rewarded because they helped the needy. The "goats" didn't. They are punished.

The "sheep" didn't realize that through these acts of love and mercy and kindness, they were doing it for the glorious Son of Man. They just thought that they were helping needy people. They are surprised when they receive their reward. This parable might be called, "The Great Surprise" rather than "The Great Judgment."

We do these things. We give food to the food bank. We welcome strangers who come through our doors. This congregations has helped prisoners. We've talked about helping refugees.

A problem with these good deeds or any good deeds is: we can wonder if we have done enough. Should I have driven the 100 miles to visit the church member who was in prison? Should I have driven the thousand miles to visit my friend when he was in prison? When I failed to visit these people in prison, was I being a goat rather than a sheep? Should I then be punished as a goat rather than rewarded as a sheep? How much is enough? How much helping the needy is good enough for us to be sheep? How much apathy and ignoring the needs of others turns us into goats? If I do nothing because I'm not aware of the needs of neighbor, am I a goat?

We hope we are sheep at the great judgment.

However, I also wonder since this judgment is against *nations*. Has our nation's care for the sick been good enough? I'm sure we could do better. Has our nation's care for the homeless been good enough? I'm sure we could do better. Will we as a nation fall under the judgment of the goats?

¹ Psalm 95:7a

² Psalm 100:3

How do we know if we have done enough good things for the needy to qualify for the inheritance of eternal life? There is always more that we could do. There are always some needy people that we've overlooked or that we just don't have the means to help. If we helped every one in need, we would also become the needy.

Maybe we aren't the sheep. Maybe we've been misreading this parable.

It seems likely to me that the first people who heard this parable saw themselves not as the sheep – people with enough means to help the needy; nor as the goats – but, rather, as the least of Jesus' brothers and sisters. "Brothers and sisters" was a term for Jesus' followers.

Christianity was an illegal religion in the first three centuries. Very early on, in the Book of Acts, we read about the stoning of Stephen and Christians fleeing from Jerusalem because of the persecution there.³ Many Christians became homeless refugees. We read that King Herod killed the apostle James and had Peter arrested.⁴ Saul was going out to arrest Christians and put them in prison when his life was turned around by Jesus on the Damascus Road. According to tradition, Peter and Paul were executed while in prison in Rome. The early Christians weren't the ones who had the means to help the needy people, they were often the needy people.

I suspect that they wondered: "What will happen to the people who have helped us in our times of need? How will God treat those who have been loving and kind to us – even if they don't yet believe in Jesus?" And perhaps also, "What is God going to do to those who caused our suffering and to those who did nothing to help us?"

Besides the fact that in the parable the needy people are called Jesus' brothers and sisters; it begins by talking about "all the nations" who are gathered before the king for their judgment. Every other time the phrase "all the nations" is used in Matthew, it refers to unbelievers. We are to make disciples of "all the nations."⁵ That implies that they are not yet believers. Jesus tells his followers that they will be hated by "all the nations."⁶ People who hate believers would not be other believers.

It also can be pointed out that "faith" is never mentioned in this parable. It never says that the "sheep" inherit eternal life because they believe. So, if not because of their faith, how do the "sheep" inherit the kingdom? The answer: by the grace of God.

I think that the word "inherit" is important. I wish I could go to Bill Gates or Jeff Bezos and demand that I inherit some of their wealth when they die – or even a little of it before they die. I don't think that would get me anything. Jeff and Bill determine who inherits their wealth; not the recipients. When the Father says that the "sheep" inherit the kingdom he has prepared for them, that is a decision that only the Father makes. It's not something the "sheep" decided for themselves. It is given to them as a gift from the Father.

Should God decide to give good things to unbelievers because they have been loving and kind to needy believers in Jesus, that's the Father's prerogative. I'm not going to argue with God about that.

Should we be in such dire straits that we are the hungry, thirsty, strangers, without a change of clothes, sick, or in prison, I think that we would welcome help from anyone who gave it – and we would consider the help to be a blessing from our God – an answer to our prayers.

³ Acts 8:2b-3

⁴ Acts 12:2, 4

⁵ Matthew 28:19

⁶ Matthew 24:9

We would also pray that God would bless those who helped us regardless of what they might think about Jesus. (We'd probably have other prayers for people who had cheated us and those we thought were friends who failed to help us.)

This approach to the parable reminds us that salvation comes to everyone as a gift from God, because none of us deserve it. None of us have done enough good things to earn our salvation. We have been promised an eternal life in the kingdom of God because of God's grace through Jesus; not because we have done good works. That promise was given to us at our baptisms, which, for most of us, was long before we were able to do much of anything – good or bad. That promise is given to us each week in the bread and wine of communion – a foretaste of the wedding feast that will come at the end of time, even though we have done good and bad during the week. This holy meal unites us with Jesus and all the benefits he gives us.

Because we are assured of our inheritance through Jesus, we are free to be the sheep in the story – to help those in need; not because we are trying to win our eternal inheritance, but simply because our neighbors need our help. If blessed rewards are given to unbelievers who are loving and kind to others, how much more can we be assured that we who believe will receive our promised reward when Jesus comes in his glory? The answer: We can be certain of our rewards through Jesus.

In the meantime, we offer as much help as we can to those in need. We have been blessed by God to bring blessings to others. While we can't solve all the world's problems or feed all the hungry, we can do what we can to help others.

Are we the sheep? It depends. Sometimes we are in positions to help others – and we should do it. Sometimes we might be in positions where we need to be helped – and we should accept it. We don't know how God might bless those who offer help to us.