

“Doing Faith”

Matthew 25: 36 – 41

Makemie Presbyterian Church

September 20, 2009

**Matthew 25: 31 - 46**

<sup>31</sup>“When the Son of Man comes in his glory & all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. <sup>32</sup>All the nations will be gathered before him & he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, <sup>33</sup>and he will put the sheep at his right hand & the goats at the left.

<sup>34</sup>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; <sup>35</sup>for I was hungry & you gave me food, I was thirsty & you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger & you welcomed me, <sup>36</sup>I was naked & you gave me clothing, I was sick & you took care of me, I was in prison & you visited me.’

<sup>37</sup>Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry & gave you food, or thirsty & gave you something to drink?

<sup>38</sup>And when was it that we saw you a stranger & welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? <sup>39</sup>And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’

<sup>40</sup>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.'

<sup>41</sup>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; <sup>42</sup>for I was hungry & you gave me no food, I was thirsty & you gave me nothing to drink, <sup>43</sup>I was a stranger & you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick & in prison & you did not visit me.'

<sup>44</sup>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?'

<sup>45</sup>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.' <sup>46</sup>And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

God's words for us.

Most mornings after I drop Jaxon off at school I take the dogs, Skylark & Seabass, & walk in the park down by the river. Sometimes there are down-on-their luck-men in the park, & just last week this was the case. He had a dog with him & wanted to know if his dog could play with my dogs. I said, "Sure."

As the dogs dipped in greeting to each other & bounded off, we began to talk. Lost job, lost income, 3 months behind in rent, a car in Ocean City, but he had taken the bus into Snow Hill to seek help at the County offices, which were not open yet.

I said, "When was the last time you ate?"

He said, "Lunch, yesterday."

I said, "If you'll watch the dogs, I'll go make some coffee & bring it back."

He said, "Ok."

When I returned with the coffee, pbj sandwiches, a baggy of food for his dog's breakfast, waters & an apple, we set down at a picnic table & ate.

He said, "I don't know the last time someone was kind to me. I can't tell you what it means."

And I said, “You are a child of God. You are precious & of great worth because of your Creator.”

And then I had to leave in part because I know all the times I have not helped, all the times when I was more goat than sheep.

Now I don't want to spend too much time belaboring the sheep/goat distinction. Sheep were certainly more valuable in Jesus' time, but since this story comes from Matthew's gospel, it really doesn't matter what image he uses: wheat & tares, good seed & bad, wise maidens & foolish ones. Matthew uses all of those – and he is the only gospel writer who uses any of them – because he is very keen on making his point. Namely, that a relationship with God is not a matter of having faith but of doing faith, & that those who don't will be fed like so much trash into the fire that never goes out.

Matthew gives me a pain. Life is never as clear cut as he makes it out to be; I can't sort things out the way he does. Worse yet, whenever I'm supposed to preach on a passage like this one, God seems to turn the heat up.

When I chaperoned a school trip to the National Zoo, I remember all those homeless people in Washington, standing it seemed on every street

corner pushing their paper cups in my face, begging for change. I handed over my quarters until they're all gone & then avoided the people with cups, just walk past them as though they weren't even there.

Was that the right thing to do?

Then Tuesday morning a man offered to wash my van in exchange for money to buy some work boots. I said, yes, although the price doubled before he was through. Wednesday morning he came back to offer me a wax job because he needed a hard hat too. I said yes, again. Wednesday afternoon he came back for grocery money & I said no. Was that the right thing to do?

Wednesday night I was standing in the checkout line at Walmart with a fifteen pound bag of dog food when a woman greeted me from behind. "Hello, honey" she said, & I turned around to smile at someone I had never seen before. She said, "Could you give me a couple of dollars to buy some hotdogs?" And my face fell. She had one bunch of celery in her cart. "I just want something for my supper" she said & I handed her a five dollar bill with an exasperated sound that I regret even now.

What was the right thing to do?

Matthew would have known, which is why he gives me a pain. But Matthew also gets my attention. He seems so sure about what is right & what is wrong – about who is blessed & who is cursed – that I get anxious about doing the right thing, about getting on God’s good side, so that when my turn comes I will be sent to the right & find myself not among the doomed goats but the favored sheep.

So when I hear a story like the one Pat just read I review my list. First I read it over carefully & note that I need at least one hungry person, one thirsty one, one stranger, one naked person, one sick person, & one prisoner, so that I can supply – in that order – food, drink, a warm welcome, some clothes, a hospital visit, & a prison visit. Then presumably I will have fulfilled all the requirements for ending up with the sheep instead of the goats. Isn’t that absurd?

But as often happens when I try to make law out of gospel – there’s a problem. Because to read the story carefully is to notice that both groups were totally baffled by the verdicts they received.

“When was it that we saw you?” That’s what they both say to the king.

The sheep didn’t know what they had done right any more than the goats knew what they had done wrong, which seems to suggest that God’s

judgment will take us all by surprise, sheep & goats alike. We can study the exam file all we want, but God only knows what will be on the final.

For the characters in the story, the biggest surprise of all seems to be that Jesus knew what they were up to when they didn't think he was around. Sheep & goats alike, they thought that he occupied one space at a time just as they did & that the way they behaved in his presence was all that really counted. Meanwhile, that left them lots of free time for being with the other people in their lives, including the ones that didn't count -- the little ones, the least ones – the waitresses, the mail carriers, the nursing home residents, the panhandlers, the inmates, the strangers at the grocery store.

The biggest surprise of all is that such people aren't unknown to the king. On the contrary, they're so close to the king that he counts everything done for them as if it had been done for him & everything not done for them as if it had not been done for him. For sheep & goats alike, the surprise is that Jesus is not somewhere – he's everywhere – especially with the least important people who populate our days, whoever they may be. God sees, God knows, & God will judge us according to how we behave when we think God isn't around.

Okay, so say that is true. Say that Jesus is present in every single person whose path crosses ours & particularly in the least ones, the lost ones, the last ones we would ever have expected. So how do we live, for goodness sakes, knowing that? How do we find the courage to get up in the morning, knowing that every pair of eyes that pleads with us that day will be his eyes, asking us for something to eat or drink or wear, asking us for recognition, for time, for attention? That's the question, isn't it? But the Bible is not a book with the answers in the back. All I know is that we are asked to wrestle with that fact, to let it challenge us & unsettle us & -- who knows? -- maybe even comfort us? Jesus is so present with us, & we have such unlimited opportunities to meet him & serve him, that in some way we may never understand everything we do or don't do affects our eternal relationship with him.

One thing is for sure. We can't win this truth like a scavenger hunt, checking off one hungry person, one thirsty one, one sick one, & one in prison. We can't toss a quarter in a cup or throw a five dollar bill at an old woman in the grocery store & call it done. "There! There's my good deed for the day, my ticket to eternity with the sheep!" We can't use people that way & besides emptying our pockets may not be the right thing to do.

The only way to tell if they are really Jesus' eyes is to look into them, to risk that moment of recognition that may break your heart, or change your mind, or make you mad, or make you amend your life. Whatever effect it has on you, that seems to be the one thing the sheep know how to do that the goats have never tried: to look, to see, to seek Christ in the lost, the least. I'm sure Matthew wouldn't agree with me, but if you ask me, that's enough to start with. The food, the drink, the welcome, the visit – all those things will follow in their own good time. They're necessary for life; they're not optional, but by themselves they are just quarters in a cup. Charity is no substitute for kinship. We're not called to be philanthropists or social workers, but brothers & sisters. We're called into relationship, even when that relationship is unlikely, momentary or sad. We're called to look at each other & see Christ, who promises to be there where our eyes meet & in that glance teach us something we need to know.

I will tell you something you already know. Sometimes when you look into those eyes all you see is your own helplessness, your own inability to know what is right. And sometimes you see your own reflection; you see everything you have & everything you are in a stark new light. Sometimes you see such gratitude that it reminds you of everything you have to be

grateful for & sometimes you see the wily will to survive that you can't help but admire, even when you are the target of its ambitions.

These are all things we need to know – about Jesus, about our brothers & sisters, about ourselves – but we can't know them if we won't look. The goats aren't condemned for doing bad things, remember, but for doing nothing. They bore the hungry, the thirsty & the stranger no malice; they simply didn't see any relationship between their lives & the lives of the least. But there is a relationship.

That's both the good news & the bad news today & at the last day, when we will stand before Christ & find out who we are. There is a relationship & it is up to each one of us to decide what we will do – or will not do about it.

Right or wrong, it helps me to remember that I'm not alone. Did you notice that? The sheep & the goats both speak in unison. "When was it that we saw you?" they say, reminding me that I'm part of a community & that sometimes we can do things together that I alone cannot. We're part of one flock. I count on your courage when mine fails, & I will stand for you when yours runs low. We can talk about what to do & why & how we feel about it.

We can hold each other up & calm each other down. We can welcome others into our fold, pressing our limits, widening our embrace.

We can do this because we are one flock, tended & fed by the Good Shepherd who is also I suspect, the Good Goatherd. When the time comes to sort us out, those are the eyes that will meet our eyes, the eyes of the judge who sees, who knows when we have looked & when we have looked away, who knows the last, the lost, the least – not only the ones outside of us but also the ones inside of us – and who lays down his life for us all.