

COME, O BLESSED

I cannot cover all the meanings of this passage in one sermon. First of all, I do not know all of them. Secondly, you know some so well you do not need further comment from me. One that you do know well, for instance, is that this parable reminds us to see Jesus in the faces of the people we meet. Mother Teresa taught her nuns this – to see Jesus in the faces of the individuals they ministered to. Even so, did you know that each nun had time for only a few individuals among India's millions of poor, diseased, and starving children of God? Were these nuns to be considered goats destined for Hell because they failed to reach all the rest? And aside from that, who is teaching people to see Jesus in the faces of the rich, of responsible businessmen, of the working middle class, of lawyers, of politicians?

We are doing strange things with the Gospel in our time. We once believed that all people were in need of God, and that God loved all people. Increasingly, we have been talking like God only loves the poor, and that if you are not poor, God only wants you for your money. Interesting. God, the richest Being in the universe, condemns wealth on principle? God, with unlimited wealth, knows he cannot save or redeem us with wealth alone, but then urges *us* to try it? What enormous pride to imagine that God is impressed with our wealth – one way or the other. The simple truth is that how we use our resources shows what we care about – where our allegiance lies – but, as the Scriptures say, “*GOD looks on the heart.*” (I Samuel 16:7)

In any case, today I must try to persuade you about three things:

- Helping others is *not* the major point of this story.
- Only what surprises you will count.
- We cannot respond to our faith simply by working at it harder.

I.) The other day, I came across a strange little poem (source unknown):

*I have wept in the night
For the shortness of sight
That to somebody's need made me blind;
But I never have yet
Felt a tinge of regret
For being a little too kind.*

It is true that I have wept in the night. I hate it when I hurt somebody or let somebody down. Wanting to meet everybody's needs is at the core of my pride, and sometimes also at the center of a caring that God is occasionally able to use. It is both a bane and a blessing in my life. So I can hardly believe that anybody could say with a straight face that they have never regretted being too kind.

Last year about this time, I was looking forward to my son getting married. I was saving up my money for this special occasion, when some yahoo called me at eleven o'clock at night with this sob story about a wife and five kids. The pitch was, he could pay his motel bill tomorrow because his parents were wiring some money, but could I *please* give the proprietor my credit card number until then.

Ministers get "hit up" like that all the time, so there is no excuse for me. I was just too tired and weary that night to fight off the desire to be kind. That man was a liar and a cheat and a thief. When I came to my right mind, I was furious at myself for supporting his habit. I was not real pleased when the bill came either.

Do you think Jesus will reward me in the next life for this kindness? What He did say, when I *finally* got around to praying, was: "I thought we had a deal here. I thought we agreed that it is MY money, and you are merely my steward. What right have you got to throw my money away like that? If you had it to spare, I could have used it a lot better than that! And how am I ever going to reach that wayward brother of yours if you keep paying him to do wrong and supporting his bad habits? Some of my servants don't know any better, but you're an alcoholic – you know what *enabling* is all about. You should be ashamed of yourself!"

What could I say? He was dead right. And having no leg to stand on whatsoever, I *was* duly ashamed. Of course, I also know Him well enough to know what to do with shame.

Have you never regretted being kind? Generosity is a powerful urge. I can remember my mother pleading with me when I was a little kid: “Your father works hard to buy these things. It isn’t fair for you to give them to your friends.” Can you remember? We do not have to be trained to be generous. We have to be trained to *not* be generous, at least in inappropriate ways and times.

My point, and I hope it is clear, is that being nice – just trying to help others – cannot be the big issue or point of this passage. Keep it simple, but do not make it silly. Jesus is not just saying, “Everybody help everybody all the time, and on the most superficial level.” It sounds nice at first, but it has no meaning. A thing that says everything says nothing.

Have you ever tried to help anybody? Do you know anybody who has *not* tried to help anybody? Everybody here who has never tried to help others, would you please raise your hands? You see? This cannot be the issue. It is not true that we are all crass, uncaring, stingy bastards. That is not our problem. If you think Jesus came to cure our uncaring, it will twist everything in Christendom out of shape for you. It is not true that we are uncaring. What is true is that we try to play God instead of obey God, and sometimes that leads us into such discouragement or despair that we have little left to give. Jesus came to reconcile us to God. When that cures uncaring, it is merely a side effect.

So you can study this passage and think of all the people you have tried to help, and know that you are a sheep. Or you can think of all the people you did not help, and know that you are a goat. Where does that leave us? Is Jesus going to throw us into Hell for all the people we did *not* feed, clothe, visit – or into Heaven for all the people we *did* feed, clothe, and visit? If you are a member of this church, you have fed, clothed, and visited a lot of people by that very interpretation, even if you did not mean to. Does that automatically make you a sheep?

When Jesus doesn’t make any sense, I tend to conclude that I probably have not heard Him yet. Helping others is not the major issue here. Helping others is the setting, the backdrop, the context of the story. But it is not the real issue. That is the first point. The first point is that helping others is not the point.

II.) If helping others is not the issue, what is? That is the second point: Only what surprises us will count.

Over and over, we have discovered that whenever Jesus teaches or tells a story, there is always more to it than meets the eye. He is not simple-minded. Not only does He have great faith, He is also pretty smart. And He sees life differently. We would not follow Him if He thought the same way we already do. So why would we expect what He says in this passage to be an exception?

Where is the hint? Where is the hook? Jesus will hide it from the careless and those in a hurry, just like He always does. But He *does* want us to find it. Everything in the story is standard, except for one thing. In fact, the story is so standard, that is part of the hint. Only one thing stands out: the goats think they have done just fine, the sheep think they have failed to serve – and both are surprised! That surprise is the only surprise in this story.

Do you know when you are doing good? Do you know when you are serving the Kingdom well? Of course you do! Serving well requires difficult decisions, commitment, hard work, and patient effort. How could you *not* know? Any goat and every goat knows that, and likes to talk about it: who I've helped, how much I've helped, how often I've helped, and at how great a cost to myself. Is the story starting to smile at you yet? If you know you are doing good, it doesn't count. If you did it on purpose, it doesn't count. It may have been a fine thing to do, a proper thing to do, a thing you would definitely want to do again if you had it to do over again. And lots of people may be thanking you, or even giving you awards or prizes. But none of that will get you into the Kingdom.

The goats do lots of things for the people they care about. Naturally! Jesus liked to make this point. *“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same.”* (Luke 6:32-33) Or again: *“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, [why?] so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.”* (Matthew 5:43-45) It's no wonder I am slow with this story – I don't get it either when Jesus says all these other things.

Nevertheless, one thing is clear in this passage: The goats think they have done everything they are supposed to do. They are really surprised

to be rejected. The sheep are equally surprised. Confronted with the terms, they are quite sure they have failed. It is unbelievable to them that they should find themselves welcomed into the Kingdom.

The problem, as usual, is that we try to reverse the story back to the familiar. Jesus clearly states that the sheep will be surprised. We cannot handle that, so we change it back again. Oh sure, we say – they were surprised up until Jesus told this story. But now that Jesus has told the story, all of us sheep have no more reason to be surprised, right? Therefore, back to the same old work and the same old approaches, just like we always did it, just like we always believed it. So now we will help everybody and know we are the sheep and not the goats – and no more surprises. Jesus might as well have saved His breath.

ONLY what surprises you will count. If you know you did it, it doesn't count. Jesus loved the point: *“Do it in secret. Your Father who sees in secret will reward you.... Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.... A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor a bad tree good fruit.... I am the vine, you are the branches. If you dwell in me you cannot keep from bearing fruit. If you dwell in me, nothing can prevent the fruit.”* And if you stop dwelling in me and start concentrating on the good you are doing, it will not count – not in the long run.

The more we hear this story, the more we hate it. We hate it until it starts to change us. We must stop focusing on the deeds, and instead pay attention to our relationship with Christ. Fruit will flow when we have become our true selves – when we have become aligned with His will. Nothing can prevent it then. And nothing can cause it beforehand. In the spiritual realm, there is no way to cheat. We cannot give what we do not have. The deeds *of the Kingdom* can only flow from what we truly ARE – and we are only our true selves in right relationship with God. Creature does not function well apart from – alienated from – Creator.

Only the things we do not do for show, for reward, or so those we love will love us back – only those things that flow from us so naturally that we do not even realize it – will truly serve the Kingdom. If we get filled enough with God's presence so that love flows – if we have opened ourselves to receive until it permeates our being – then relationship with God will begin to infiltrate and change our relationships with others. (All things will begin to interconnect again.) It is the oldest theme in Christendom: You loved us, so we begin to love. You forgave us, so we begin to forgive.

Nevertheless, what pleases the Savior about your life is going to surprise you. None of the things we think are going to get us “in” will count. That is what the story says, point-blank. The sheep will say, “Who me? When? I don’t remember that.” Everything else is goat talk, sometimes called “bleating.” Do not try to out-fox the story. If you are a sheep, you do not know the real good you are doing. That is what the story says. Keep following the Shepherd, and let the Shepherd worry about what will come of it all.

III.) Helping others is not the major issue. Only what surprises you will count. It must become so much a part of you that you are not even aware of it as giving.

That brings us to the last point: We cannot simply work harder at it, not in any traditional way in which we might understand such effort. I wonder if you truly agree with that. If you consciously set out to do better – to help more people more – then by the very terms of this story, it will not count. That is goat work! And that is also what keeps driving us nuts about the Gospel. We want to *do* it, work at it, deserve it, train for it, get credit and acclaim for it. “Please, Jesus, I’d rather do it myself.”

What is the Holy Spirit’s inevitable reply? “I appreciate your intention, but it is a dead end ... a deadly end. It will not work. You cannot do it alone, or by yourself, or for yourself, or in your own way. You need me. You need a Savior. You must be changed, transformed. You cannot do that for yourself. You must be born anew. Let me in. Give it up. Turn it over. I am the vine, you are the branches. Apart from me, you can do nothing [that matters].”

Goats are not “bad” people. Sheep are not “good” people. The world loves to think in such terms, but we will never understand Jesus until we give up thinking in such terms. What is the difference between sheep and goats? Lambs are for the altar. They do not *make* themselves holy; God sanctifies them, and uses them. They have no clear notion of how much God is using them. That is why you will be so surprised when the Lord says, “*Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.*” If you want to be a lamb instead of a goat, your only chance is to get to the altar. Forget the good deeds, get to the altar. Then God can do whatever he likes with you.