

When we think of shepherds and sheep, When we think of shepherd imagery in Jewish scriptures, and of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. When we think of the famous 23rd Psalm, we naturally gravitate toward the very pleasant, the comforting, even the musical renditions of “the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.”

But in the Christian calendar, in the Christian lectionary, we find these other images, of separating sheep from goats in the “last days,” often called the Last Judgment (Matthew chapter 25). The parable of the sheep and the goats is both famous and difficult! The words of Jesus seem rather harsh, yet they do echo the words of Jewish prophets. Jesus implies that some people are rather callous and ignore the the hungry, the sick, the stranger, the imprisoned. The prophet Ezekiel is even more harsh or accusatory, implying that many of his listeners were bad sheep, oppressors and occupiers, who ate and drank what they needed, but pushed all the weaker animals aside, contaminated their water and stomped on their grass. Sounds like survival of the fittest. Sounds like a lot of areas of our world now.

Jesus was always using parables, stories with metaphors and allegories to make his points. He used common things of his day as teaching tools. In this case he points to sheep and goats. Apparently sheep were more valuable than goats; we know they have provided wool for warmth for thousands of years. We know that they were preferred for meat also, then and now; many observant Christians choose Lamb for Easter dinners, and Jesus has been called the sacrificial Lamb. Lamb is so precious that it was considered a greater sacrifice, since the time of the Jewish Passover, the salvation from bondage in Egypt. So Jesus as Savior becomes for us the “Sacrificial Lamb.”

What can we say about goats? They were less valued. They were even used as “scapegoats” in ancient Jewish culture, to cast sins upon them and send them off into the wilderness. Surely the meat was not as tasty, and their hair was not as warm as wool from

sheep. In this parable, the goats represent the people that are callous, overlooking or ignoring people that are naked, hungry and sick, and Jesus says they have an eternal punishment, as they will be with the devil and his angels!

I must say that I find Jesus to be overly harsh in parables like this, and that I don't take the images of heaven and hell literally. The images are used as metaphors, symbols and allegories, as was Jesus custom, and the custom of many story tellers in that day.

I often say that such parables are a form of rhetorical speech, speech that has extremes or dualisms to make a point. Life cannot be so black and white, separating the world into *good* sheep and *evil* goats! (there must be areas of GREY, and there are good and bad impulses and potential in all people. We need to listen to our "better angels" implies that we also can listen to our lower inclinations.)

Perhaps Jesus could have said, "Hey, Care for people in need (like the parable of the Good Samaritan who nursed the guy lying in the road who was beaten up by robbers). But Jesus increased the stakes by using images of his time, images of there being a climactic coming of God, a final judgement, filled with punishments and rewards, images of hell and heaven. Did Jesus mean a literal hell and heaven as *places*? Who knows, but I don't think so. Jesus was so symbolic in his speaking and teaching, that he may very well have been speaking of "heaven and hell starting here on earth," and being continual experiences that are hard to change. After all, in the Lord's Prayer that Jesus taught, we all say the phrase, "Thy kingdom come...*on earth* as it is in heaven." Expressions like "inherit the kingdom of heaven" and "enter the kingdom of heaven" may refer to ongoing life after we die, but surely Jesus meant for the kingdom of *heaven* to be realized here on *earth*, in the here and now!

Back to the images of sheep and goats. The world, and apparently Jesus too, loves simple lessons, lessons of contrasts, and to the people of that day, sheep and goats were a simple teaching

tool. We read that in Palestine, the goats were mostly black, so they did contrast with, and could easily be separated from the white sheep, and shepherd must have regularly had to separate the sheep and the goats, especially at times to shear for wool or to sacrifice for meat.

Jesus used a convenient image for a metaphorical teaching. But if Jesus lived in our time, he might not be so quick to use goats to represent callous, hard-hearted people. GOATS have made a comeback in our day and age. People pass around videos of baby goats, exclaiming how cute and smart they are. Yoga entrepreneurs have new clubs and therapies for Goat-Yoga (you, know, let small goats walk up and down your back, while you do poses facing the floor. And of course, since they are smart, they can learn to collaborate in yoga moves!) And how about the increase of lactose intolerant people in our world??? A staple now in many restaurants is Salad with Goat Cheese! And finally, the reputation of goats has really come up in the world, at least in New England, if we say that GOAT means a QB who was “greatest of all time!”

In another famous story about animals as metaphors for people, we do well to remember that Peter had that vision of all the animals on a white sheet, with God saying Kill and Eat! Peter learned by analogy, that God had no partiality, but would welcome people of different tribes and nations. The meaning of Peter’s vision was that there was good in all, at least good potential in all. Most people love Peter’s vision.

Staying with the positive aspects, I think most people love this Matthew 25 passage, that the Last Judgment has Christ judging people according to *how we have responded* to people who are hungry, thirsty, strangers, homeless, sick, imprisoned, etc. Being part of the Kingdom of God has more to do with how we treat our neighbor than exactly what we believe about the spiritual world and afterlife. (If you believe in God and love God, have you loved your

neighbor?) Jesus affirmed that when he said, “the world will know you are my followers by the way you love one another.”

The world has become a smaller place. Some used to call the United States a melting pot. This implies becoming more homogenized, becoming more alike. But many have lifted up the image of a Salad Bowl... we have our distinct differences and ways of being and speaking and believing. In a Salad Bowl, many ingredients are welcome, and in the area of cheese...there are many varieties that perk up a salad, Goat cheese being one of them! (Next time you have a choice in salads, why not try one with goat cheese? It can be a reminder of Peter’s vision that all animals are regarded as clean or edible.)

The goats in Jesus parable are “sent away” only symbolically. Realistically, the “punishment” is self-inflicted; it is that we do separate ourselves from God and Love when we are hard-hearted and ignore, even push aside the needs of the poor, the hungry, the strangers in our midst. And if this habit is entrenched, our separation from God surely can continue into eternity.

There will always be unanswerable questions about the end of the world, life after death, heaven and hell. To the extent that our life will be a continuation of this life, we do well to heed Jesus’ words in the Lord’s Prayer: Thy kingdom come **on earth** as it is in heaven. We must find ways to value all kinds of animals, and care for all the various kinds of people in our world (since all have both good and evil potential), even what Jesus called “the least of these,” his brothers and sisters, and that seems to be central message, or most important part of the parable of the sheep and the goats! Amen.