

“You Did It to Me”

Matthew 25:31-46

If you had to be an animal during Bible times, it would be preferable not to be a goat. For one reason, there's that whole scapegoat thing. The scapegoat was the goat over whose head the high priest Aaron confessed the sins of the people of Israel on the Day of Atonement. Then the goat, symbolically bearing their sins, was driven out into the wilderness, where it probably became dinner for a hungry lion.

Of course, one might argue, being a sheep could be equally as dangerous. A sheep, after giving up its wool, often appeared on the dinner table, or in the stew, or on the altar as a sacrifice. That said, goats in the Bible clearly are not viewed as sympathetically as sheep, and the NT singles out goats for unwelcome treatment as well. When talking about the final judgment, Jesus speaks of separating sheep from goats, and it's clear that the goats are the losers in this sorting.

As a farm boy growing up in Medina County, I really came to love and appreciate goats and to despise the stupidity of sheep. When I was in elementary school, I would always take one of our goats to show at the Medina County Fair. Over the years, we had both white Nubians and brown and white French Alpines. We began our showmanship training with the goats until we were big enough to show cows. But the goats were always more fun, had more distinct personalities, and certainly were much more intelligent than either cows or sheep. I remember getting down on all fours and butting heads with my favorite goats, who took great pleasure in knocking me over. When I began playing football in 7th grade, my coaches were

always amazed by how fearless I was in leading with my head. It also may explain some of my behavior today!

Of course, as Jesus goes on with his discourse, it's quickly evident that he's not actually talking about animals. He's using sheep and goats as an analogy for humankind, which is likewise sorted into two groups at the final judgment -- sheep-people on the right and goat-people on the left.

The ones on the right are welcomed into the kingdom of God. The ones on the left are told to depart from Christ's presence forever. The criteria for the sorting, however, have nothing to do with being a goat or sheep. Rather, they have to do with whether or not one has been merciful and helpful to those in dire straits. Those on the right, Jesus said, have actually ministered to *him* by their compassion toward those in need. Those on the left have actually ignored *him* by ignoring the needy.

One of the striking things from this account is that unlike sheep and goats, those who have loved their neighbor and those who have not can ultimately only be distinguished by the Son of Man, who serves as the Great Sorter in the story. Even the doers and non-doers of good deeds don't easily recognize which are which, and the members of both groups are quite surprised to learn which one they've been sorted into. As commentator George Buttrick put it, "The loving folk were so lowly that it did not occur to them that their daily kindnesses could ever have been a personal service to the King, or that they had done anything worthy of reward. The unloving were so callous, their religion so loveless, that they never thought of Jesus as being linked with [humans] in love, or as asking from anyone any deed of compassion."

There are several things we can hear for ourselves in the judgment story.

One is to recognize that our sins of *omission* can be just as serious as our sins of *commission*. The passage reminds us that what we don't do can be as great a reflection of our commitment to follow Jesus -- or lack thereof -- as what we do.

Some may hear this story as a call to serve others in a specific way. Many good works have been done in the world because some Christians have seen in this passage a model for how love for one's neighbor should be put into action.

Certainly here at Divinity, we are blessed with many people in many ministries who are loving our neighbors. When I arrived here 8 ½ years ago, Terri Revilock was coordinating several Divinity volunteers who were tutoring Parma Park students across the street in reading. When Terri moved from her job at Parma Park to full-time grandparenthood, the tutoring relationships came to an end.

This fall, newly retired teacher Sue Clay has successfully resurrected our tutoring ministry along with ten Divinity volunteers – Linda Gattiker, Milene Bender, Richard and Carolyn Kolp, Florence Simmerer, Joan Hespe, Alice Linn, Pat Carmichael, Mary Goellner, and Nancy Kilkenny. These folks have responded to a need in our community to help our children learn to read. Everyone can hear these words of Jesus to serve as a reminder to put our faith into action.

Stan G. Duncan, author of *The Greatest Story Oversold: Understanding Economic Globalization*, says comedian Stephen Colbert could be cited in serving others. Colbert, who spent a day picking beans with migrant farm workers under the satirical "take my job" campaign in September 2010, later testified about it in Congress. He did the whole schtick in character (sounding pompous and insulted that he had to pick beans), until someone asked him

why he chose this particular issue to come to Congress about. He broke character for a moment and said this:

I like talking about people who don't have any power, and this seems like, one of the least powerful people in the United States are migrant workers who come and do our work but don't have any rights as a result. And yet we still invite them to come here and at the same time ask them to leave. That's an interesting contradiction to me. And, you know, "*Whatsoever you do for the least of my brothers*" -- and this seems like the least of brothers -- right now. A lot of people are least brothers right now because the economy is so hard. And I don't want to take anyone's hardship away from them or diminish anything like that. But migrant workers suffer and have no rights.

Biblical commentators sometimes point out that this account, as Jesus told it, gives a one-sided view of the Christian life, making it sound as if the whole of it is doing good deeds. The final judgment as described here seems to look only at whether or not one loved one's neighbor. It says nothing about whether or not one loved God, sought forgiveness of sins or embraced Jesus as Savior. Judging from this passage alone, a nonbeliever who is compassionate to his neighbor in need is on the same footing as a believer who does the same.

But, of course, Jesus wasn't trying to give a full description of the final judgment, but rather to make a point about not ignoring the poor, economically depressed and oppressed among us. At least part of what this account implies is that having our sins forgiven should result in a greater willingness to love our neighbor, a point the New Testament makes more specifically elsewhere:

- Paul, writing to Titus, says, "I desire that you insist on these things, so that those who have come to believe in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works; these things are excellent and profitable to everyone" (Titus 3:8).

- James writes, "If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (James 2:15-17).

- First Corinthians 11:22, where Paul chastises the rich folk for coming to the Eucharistic meal early and eating all of the food and not leaving any for the poor folk who have jobs and arrive late. "What, do you have no homes in which to eat and drink? Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing?" In other words, "How can you come here to honor the Christ who died for you, yet you do not honor the needs of the poor?"

Certainly, the doing of good deeds does not eliminate the need for forgiveness of sin, but there can be no lasting faith, no love of neighbor, without actual acts of doing good deeds.

This judgment account reminds us *that the arena of faith is daily life*. The "goats" had separated their commitment to Jesus from the doings of daily life. But in reality, the place we live our faith is in the sheepfold of our daily lives. In other words, this story tells us that compassion belongs in not only extraordinary circumstances, but also in our ordinary and everyday encounters. We need to hear that because most of life is not played out on the big stage, in the kinds of events that make headline news. Rather it happens in the smaller things -- the chance meetings, the routine places, the circumstances where, when we do a good deed, it seems to us so ordinary that we think it's hardly worth mentioning, and certainly not worthy of earning us a place with sheep.

One more thing to hear from this account is that *God has provided some directions for living*. We once saw a sign that read, "This life is only a test. If it had been an actual life, you would have been given further instructions on where to go and what to do." We can perhaps identify with that, especially when we think of the number of unexpected circumstances that arise in life where we have no clear idea of how to respond, and we have to do the best we can and muddle through. But there is a sense in which these words of Jesus *are* instructions about what to do -- at least in circumstances where we see someone in need: We should think of what we would do if that person were Jesus, and then do that, for in helping that person, we really are helping Jesus as well.

There's an old story -- probably invented by some preacher -- but it illustrates the spirit of this passage pretty well. It's about a boy living in a children's home. For grace at the dinner table, the superintendent usually prayed, "Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest, let this food to us be blessed." After this happened several times, the boy said to him, "You always ask Jesus to come, but he never does. Will he ever come?"

The superintendent said, "If we really want him to, he will."

The boy thought, "I really want him to, so I'm going to put a chair beside me tonight so he'll have a place to sit when he comes."

That evening, during supper, there was a knock on the door, and standing there was an old man, poorly clothed, cold and hungry. The superintendent invited him to join them for supper, and he pointed to the empty chair. The man sat and, and the boy gladly passed food to him and even shared from his own plate.

Later the boy said, "Jesus must not have been able to come himself, so he sent this man in his place."

Exactly. Our good deeds are not by themselves a means of salvation, but they do put us in relationship with Jesus, whether we recognize it or not.

One thing we should not hear from this account is the idea of God as a Cosmic Scorekeeper, keeping some sort of database where he tallies up the exact number of our good deeds. It's unlikely Jesus wanted to paint God that way. It's also unlikely that he was telling us to rummage through our memory and conscience to decide when we last did a good deed so we can keep score ourselves and decide whether we are a sheep or a goat.

Jesus was probably not trying to scare us by talking about judgment either. More likely, he was trying to get our attention in a dramatic way and communicate that God really does want us to love our neighbor as ourselves. He really does want us to keep working at it, to not excuse ourselves, to not assume somebody else will do it and to not act as if it doesn't matter.

It does matter. That's probably why Jesus used such dramatic language in this story. To those on his right, those who have unknowingly served him through good deeds to others, he says "Come ... inherit the kingdom." To those on his left, who have unknowingly ignored him by knowingly ignoring the needs of others, he says, "Depart ... into the eternal fire." "*Depart* is a terrible word; *come* has all heaven's light and love."

Depart and come are strong words, but rather than lose ourselves in them, the ones better to remember from this story are these: "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."