

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, and Reign of Christ Sunday and Thanksgiving Sunday, November 20, 2011, dedicated to Ruth Ann Sitler, who entered eternal life on November 18, 2011, to her grieving family, and always to the glory of God!

“Matthew 25 Christians”

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24;

Matthew 25:31-46

Today, we come to the close of this church year. We leave the primary texts of Matthew’s gospel after 52 weeks of living within the vision and the glory of St. Matthew’s texts. With Advent’s arrival next Sunday, we move into the pithy, simple and direct stories of St. Mark. For the last few weeks we have been building one parable at a time to this parable of final judgment. This parable separates and clarifies. It distinguishes who will burn in eternal punishment and who will go to heaven. Listen and learn. (Read Matthew 25:31-46)

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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For two weeks our poor little church on the corner of Storer Avenue and West 41st on the west side of Cleveland had held its Vacation Bible School every weekday from 9 a.m. to noon. Over 100 children had come from everywhere to participate each morning. We had been raising money for “Goats for Guatemala” as our mission for Heifer Project International.

Six-year-old, Gloria Swaitek was one of our children. Gloria never missed a day. She was our number #1 mission

partner for Guatemalan goats, collecting money from all her extended family and all her neighbors for weeks. She had gone door to door several times. She had sold lemonade. She had asked her grandparents for money so many times, the piggy bank in their bedroom was down to its last few coins.

Gloria had latched on to something that the rest of us did not know. She knew that if she won the top prize of collecting the most money for Heifer Project International, she would come home with a real goat. Somehow Gloria heard me say we were raising funds for “goats for Gloria.” All we needed was \$100. In the end, Gloria had raised \$118.24 in small coins and single dollars all by herself.

At the final program on Friday night of the second week, Gloria was the first person in the sanctuary (along with her mom and dad). Her mother pulled me aside, *“Rev. Tim, Gloria thinks you are giving her a goat tonight.”* “What?” I responded. Mom continued whispering, *“She thinks this is a “goat for Gloria” program. I didn’t realize it, but this afternoon, she was making a place in the backyard for our new goat. Then she told me that Rev. Tim was buying her a goat. She has invited our entire family to come. What can we do?”* I smiled at Gloria a few feet away and I waved nervously at the leader of my herd (not even 40” tall).

I thought quickly. I would give her the goat cut-out as our prize for being #1 (after all Gloria had more than doubling the rest of the VBSers put together. Because of Gloria we had two goats for Guatemala!). She was awarded the goat cut-out. It took some explaining after the celebration, but she could live with the large goat doll being promised. That is, if I could find a goat. You see, goat dolls are not popular. Goats have a bad reputation. I think it comes directly from the parable found in Matthew 25:31-46. Eventually, I gave a sheep to Gloria. She didn’t even bleat. She simply took him in her arms and smiled.

Jesus tells us that goats don’t make good disciples.

They don't see well. They don't follow well. They don't act right. They end up in eternal punishment. Their lousy reputation (beyond Guatemalan goats) has marked their story ever since this parable was published. No one wants to be a goat. But on any given day, according to the criterion laid out in the parable, you and I end up on the "goat team," even though we don't want to be there.

We want to be on the "sheep team!" The sheep acted on behalf of the Son of Adam. They fed him when he was hungry, gave him drink in his thirst, gave him shelter when he was refugee in their community, clothed him when he was naked, looked in on him when he was sick, and visited him when he was in prison. The other group (the goats) did not act because he was an invisible man to them. Moreover, they simply didn't do well for others. They didn't see any point to it!

While the groups differed, they all shared something very much in common in our story. Neither group sees Son of Adam. Although their behavior is different, their perceptions are the same. Self-admittedly, neither group sees the face of Jesus everywhere. So, if we want to launch into a glorious crusade proclaiming that the good guys see "Jesus in every one" and act and the bad guys don't see Jesus and therefore, don't act, we can't do that.

The real difference between sheep and goats - between Matthew 25 Christians and those who can't claim that prize - is that the sheep **see the face of the poor** and the goats do not. In fact, looking for the face of Jesus (according to our text) may be a waste of time. Instead, looking into the eyes of the poor and seeing them and acting on their behalf is all we need to do in order that our spiritual energy points toward eternity. Ironically, by looking into the eyes and the faces of the poor, we will see the eyes and the face of Jesus.

This issue of compassion and care for the poor is huge. It is not a side issue at all. Liberation theologians refer to this as "Jesus' preferential option for the poor." Some consider

liberation themes controversial. For the life of me, I can't figure out why. All four gospels state very clearly, in many different ways, that Christ is a friend of the poor, identifies with them, and is found with them. It is not for nothing that Jesus was born to a poverty-stricken Jewish family from a hick little town. He dies on a cross between two poor men. He is raised from the grave and appears to women (at the bottom of the economic ladder) and the poor fishermen who are his closest friends and followers (not a rich crowd either).

In Matthew 5, Jesus opened the Sermon on the Mount by pronouncing blessing on the despised and bereft and 20 chapters later, he closes by announcing his presence in them. On this Reign of Christ Sunday, all who are worried about when Jesus will come again need only absorb this passage. The answer is that Jesus never left. He has been here all along, and is present now in the little, the least, the lonely, and the lost. This parable is the climax of Jesus' teaching ministry in Matthew's gospel. It is the final piece of the puzzle.

Let us be clear about something. Even though both groups in this ritualized story of separation do not see Jesus, their behavior is what separates them. The sheep did not see the Son of Adam, but they did see hungry, thirsty, naked, imprisoned and forsaken refugees. They fed them because they were hungry, not because they were deserving. They clothed them because they were naked, not because they were unjustly deprived on their dignity. They visited the sick because they were sick and called on people in prison, fully aware that many had earned their way to prison and needed to be confined for the safety of those outside the walls, but also knowing they were human beings at (perhaps) the lowest place in the kingdom of this world.

I don't know who among us wants to play the roll of deciding who is a sheep and who is a goat; who will go to eternal punishment and who will go to eternal life. As I said earlier, on any given day, in any number of circumstances, any one of us may turn a blind eye to hunger, thirst, sickness

and poverty in all its ugliness. But, who wants to play God? In the end, who among us is ready and able to sort out sheep and goats in the human family?

In our attempt to avoid the roll of “separating the nations,” as Jesus says, we would do well to live fully into this parable of judgment. Our actions will speak louder than any of our words - when all is said and done. As the percentage of poor continues to rise across the globe and the wealth of a few also rises, we would do well to open our eyes, look around us, see our brothers and sisters in need and then act out of a deep felt sense of justice and mercy as the parable calls us to do.

If we want to experience eternal life now, “heaven on earth” now, if we want to experience a vision of a God’s kingdom coming now, where we all feed each other, take care of each other and love each other, we need to open our eyes and act. We need to love one another - in the end, it is the act of love that ultimately separates the sheep and goats.

I have been thinking about this in the context of child abuse scandals swirling around State College, Pa., and Syracuse, and earlier around the Catholic Church and other institutions. When did we see the children sinking into sadness and sickness? When did we see them lost and lonely? When did we see them acting out or acting up - and reached out to them in their pain? When we saw them and acted compassionately and justly, when we did it to least of them, we did it unto Christ.

When we see children dropping into poverty like leaves from a tree? When did we see them in the pipeline from poverty to prison? When saw them and acted compassionately, we did it unto Christ.

Or when did we see and hear “Occupy Wall Street” demonstrators across the country raising questions about a system in which the rich get richer and the poor get poorer and when did we respond with compassion to these legitimate

struggles of our times? When we heard, when we saw, when we acted, we did it unto Christ.

Or when did we see “wounded warriors” returning from Iraq and Afghanistan and reach out to them in love? When did we reach out to them in love and welcome them home? With less than 1% of Americans engaged in this war, we may not see our women and men who have served abroad. But we are called to open our eyes, to act with love. When we do it to the least of these our brothers and sisters home from the combat zones, we do it unto Christ.

Remember this: Any time you are serving someone who is in need, is lonely or is separated from others, you are ultimately serving Jesus and leading a full life. Matthew 25 offers concrete ways to interact with our human family and thus to interact with Jesus. Here we have concrete examples of how to put the love of God into empty places in the world.

We can make choices to be sheep and not goats. It comes down to every minute of every day. It comes down to seeing and acting. Often it comes down to random acts of kindness and love. When we see the children, our brothers and sisters in need, we see Jesus. When we see Jesus, we join the sheep team. In the spirit of Gloria, I pray on this Reign of Christ Sunday, we will more and more become Matthew 25 Christians. Amen.

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