Sheep AND Goats
Bob Stillerman
Reign of Christ Sunday, Matthew 25:31-46
11/22/2026

Matthew 25:31-46

25:31 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory.

25:32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats,

25:33 and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

25:34 Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world,

25:35 for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me,

25:36 I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'

25:37 Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food or thirsty and gave you something to drink?

25:38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you or naked and gave you clothing?

25:39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?'

25:40 And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.'

25:41 Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You who are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels,

25:42 for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink,

25:43 I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.'

25:44 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?'

25:45 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.'

25:46 And these will go away into eternal punishment but the righteous into eternal life."

Sermon: Sheet AND Goats

Ours is a God of limitless creativity and possibility. Somehow, some way, God birthed creation: vast oceans, mountain ranges, sky and heavens and stars, even pink flamingos.

I believe ours is an affectionate, intimate God. Yes, our Creator is complex, but They also pay attention to the smallest of details. The very same Creator who concepted gravity and carved a river through the Grand Canyon also devoted (and still devotes!) precious, meticulous thought to the creation of every human being, and indeed every creature. God participates in our design and delights in our presence.

Our Creator loves creation!
My theology professor, Frank Tupper, always reminded us that this concept is SO audacious it must be true!

We allow ourselves to subscribe to a God with infinite power and possibilities. Why then, when we allow our imaginations to run wild about God's creative power, do our imaginations become so small when it comes to God's love, forgiveness, and grace?

I believe that God's most miraculous power is Their limitless capacity for love, forgiveness, and grace. And I believe God's world will only be revealed when God's people allow their understanding of God's capacity for love, forgiveness, and grace to transcend worldly imagination.

I've probably read today's passage a thousand times. Even had it read during my ordination service. And every time I hear about helping the least of these, my heart swells with joy in imagining a God who not only resides alongside society's most vulnerable neighbors, but identifies with them, too.

I'll also tell you that one of my proudest moments of fourth grade was memorizing and reciting Matthew 25:40:

> *Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.*

I love the beginning of this morning's text. And then, in a matter of four verses, my joy, and my good memories, are swallowed up.

It's true that the goats are not model examples of Christ's hospitality. Still, it seems to me they are denied any chance of reconciliation or restoration. And the Jesus who's coming back seems a whole lot more like a vigilante than a righteous judge.

So…what to say?!?

I could just discard this text and assign it the same irredeemable qualities it seems to assign to those inhospitable goats. But that wouldn't model God's sense of empathy, would it?

Instead, I keep asking myself: Is this text as harsh as it sounds?

Is the second half simply a rhetorical device? Is the author adding irony or sarcasm to the voice of Jesus?

> *But you, O inhospitable ones, you are gonna get it!!! Because you know me, I love that fire and brimstone. You are despicable. I can't even look at you!*

Maybe the harsh rhetoric is a venting session. We know that Matthew's fellowship is a wounded people. They have known the abuses of Rome's domination system AND the heartache of community fissure.

Jackson Helms eloquently introduced us to imprecatory psalms this winter, those writings that evoke raw emotion and spurn their enemies. I don't know any of these psalms offhand, but I am reminded of more modern psalms.

Country star Miranda Lambert wrote a hit song called *Kerosene* that reflected the feelings of a spurned lover: "Light 'em up and watch 'em burn, ha."

I'm grateful for the "ha" that follows that lyric, because it illustrates emotion, and hyperbole, and channeled lament. Sometimes wounded people need language big enough to hold their anger. Maybe the Matthean community believed harsh rhetoric would generate a sincere and repentant response from their abusers?

Both theories are possible. But I'm not convinced either one should be our compass.
Maybe our mistake is treating this morning's parable like a map of the afterlife instead of allowing it to disrupt our imagination in the present.

When I take this approach, the hidden truth hits me square between the eyes.

On this Reign of Christ Sunday, we, the ecumenical Church, lift up the Lordship of Christ over and above the lordship of Caesar, particularly the kind of lordship that fashions itself in fascism and authoritarianism.

When the ruler or the judge returns, we are pleasantly surprised to learn that unlike Caesar, or Pharaoh, or other powerful monarchs, this ruler identifies with the most vulnerable.
Therefore, feeding the hungry, and watering the thirsty, and caring for the infirmed, and welcoming the stranger, and visiting the prisoner are all actions that serve and honor the ruler.

I'll not criticize our text for admonishing goats who deny the image of God in the hungry, and the thirsty, and the stranger, and the infirmed, and the imprisoned, and in all who are vulnerable. We must work for a world where we refine our vision, not through the lenses of privilege, but through the lenses of love.

Maybe the problem isn't that Jesus' imagination of justice is too small.

Maybe the problem is that ours is.

We hear ruler, and judge, and judgment, and immediately our imaginations fill in the blanks with Caesar. We expect God's justice to mimic Caesar's. The only difference is in the way we expect that justice to be applied to different audiences. In Caesar's realm, the powerful will enjoy the loving side of justice, and the vulnerable will know its harsher edges.

Often, we imagine God's realm as simply the inverse: now, the vulnerable get the good stuff, and those who were powerful get what's coming to them.

But doesn't that feel a lot like Caesar's imagination?

It's the same old game of king of the mountain, the same old pyramid structure. We've just imagined someone different at the top.

The truth is that we often limit the possibilities of God's justice in the same way we limit the possibilities of God's grace. But if we're gonna realize kingdom-living, we've got to start believing that God is more imaginative, more creative, much more transcendent than each of us when it comes to such matters.

If we're in a rush, we can read the whole of Matthew 25 and understand the world as a place of utter polarization: wise and foolish; prepared and unprepared; lazy and hardworking; righteous and unrighteous; first and last; best and least; sheep and goats. And it can get us all tied up in knots as we seek to convince ourselves, and our neighbors, of why each one of us is wise, and prepared, and hardworking, and righteous, and first, and best, and sheepish, and oh-so-deserving of God's primary attention and status. And rather than caring about the whole of God's creation, and all the creatures that compose it, we only concern ourselves with ensuring we're at the top of the pyramid.

It's not the domination system we're concerned about. It's making sure that we aren't personally dominated.

But God's liberation is more complicated than making the last first and the least most. And it always has been.

The Exodus didn't end with the humbling of Pharaoh. It also included a covenant of love for God and neighbor, and the promise of Jubilee.

And Jesus tells a similar story. It's not just that the least and the last are gonna matter again. God's system of justice transcends Caesar's because a person's value is not numeric or steeped in privilege.

What good is having the most, if all have enough?

What good is being the first in line, if the person at the end of the line finds the same sense of satisfaction, the same boundless love, the same multitude of potential as the person at the beginning of the line?

Maybe God's reign isn't about flipping a pyramid upside down or right side up. Maybe God's reign reminds us we don't need a pyramid at all.

Caesar can only imagine a world ruled by diminishing returns. Lucky for us, God is not so short-sighted!!!

Jesus didn't come to Earth to make minor modifications to Caesar's faulty justice system.

Jesus lived among us to show us another possibility, and to invite us to imagine, experience, and participate in God's justice: Creation, humanity, other creatures, and land, all living in accordance with God's decrees; mutual respect, mutual love, mutual neighboring, mutual distribution.

In God's justice system, domination gives way to cooperation; scarcity gives way to abundance; impossibility gives way to possibility.

And maybe that brings us back to the least of these. Because Jesus doesn't give us an abstract theory of justice.

> *I was hungry, and you fed me.*
> *I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink.*
> *I was a stranger, and you welcomed me.*
> *I was sick, and you cared for me.*
> *I was in prison, and you visited me.*

The God who imagined oceans and mountains and stars and pink flamingos has chosen to be found there.

In them.

Among the people Caesar has conditioned us to call the least.

We begin the season of Advent next week. Precisely the season we need.

I believe we would do well to stop hoping for the arrival of One who will simply reform systems to meet our liking, or who will restore or ensure our privileges. And I believe we would do even better to start hoping for the arrival of One who births new things, inspires new possibilities, and redefines our understanding of justice.

Because the God who imagined oceans and mountains and stars, and yes, even pink flamingos, is not finished imagining.

Perhaps we aren't waiting for God to repair Caesar's world. Perhaps, instead, we are waiting, watching, and working for something Caesar could never imagine.

A world where the hungry are fed because there is enough.

Where the thirsty are given something to drink because the water belongs to all of us.
Where strangers are welcomed because there is plenty of room.

Where prisoners are remembered because nobody is disposable.

Where the vulnerable are not the least at all, because Christ is already among them.

Domination gives way to cooperation.

Scarcity gives way to abundance.

Impossibility gives way to possibility.

And what if it starts, right here?

At a table where there is enough.

At a table where everyone is welcome.

At a table where nobody is least.

What if God's new world starts right here, right now, at the table in front of us?

May it be so.

Amen.