



**11/25/20 King of Goats and Sheep**  
**Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Psalm 95:1-7a; Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46**  
**Reverend Giuseppe Mattei**

Farming is a hard life. Only a small number of those who grow up on a farm stay on as adults. According to the Farm Bureau, only 2% of Americans live on a farm or ranch. Farm equipment is extremely expensive and competition of the small family farm with large agribusiness is fierce. There is no secret that the US farming industry is in a massive state of transition. <sup>1</sup>

Farming stories are rarely part of our everyday talk. To Jesus, parables based on farming metaphors were a natural way to connect with his audience. Even those living in cities saw flocks in the fields and live animals in the market. When Jesus brought up farm examples, people knew what he was talking about.

The parable of separating goats and sheep is the last parable in Matthew's Gospel. This was Jesus' last opportunity to teach the crowds before his crucifixion and resurrection in the gospel of Matthew, and he chose to talk about barnyard animals. What did he have in mind? Let's break it down.

During the day goats and sheep are friendly in the fields but at feeding times and bedtime, one needs to separate goats from the sheep. Why? Because goats can be a pain. They bash and butt the sheep away from the grain and will push their woolly friends out of their shelter into the rain. The sayings "stubborn as a goat" and "sheepish" are labels commonly used to describe two different behaviors. Just like any other label, these two imply a favorable or unfavorable judgment relative to the interpretations of the one pronouncing them.

Through a hyperbole, Jesus talks about the "final judgment." People are going to be separated and dealt with according to their kindness and generosity - or lack thereof - "to the least of these." One thing needs to be clear: no one judges but the King and we are not him.

I am confident each of us is going to be acknowledged for having loved our neighbor in need just as we love Jesus. Often, we extend a helping hand not necessarily out of faith but simply because that is the way we are. We have been doing kind acts of mercy for so long that we do not consider them extraordinary but part of our everyday life. That's what would prompt the question "When Lord? When did we see you hungry, naked, homeless and helped you?"

And yet, we also hear that nagging feeling that casts doubts on our generosity and sincerity. The questions: "Are you sure you are truly loving the least of these as Jesus

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/farm-economy/farm-labor>; <http://familyfarmingahap.weebly.com/family-vs-corporate-farming.html>



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expects?” and “Are you doing enough?” are constantly in the back of our mind and perpetually challenging our perception of ourselves and the consistency and depth of our love. Donor as well as volunteer fatigue effects on and off non-for-profit organizations, including churches, to the point that at times outreach services need to be reduced if not altogether interrupted.<sup>2</sup>

So, if we search our hearts with honesty, we’ll realize that the unselfconscious and generous moments in our life are going to be acknowledged along with the times when we have displayed stubbornness, laziness, and selfishness.

At first glance the gospel reading suggests everyone should work really hard to be faithful sheep and not be labeled as unfaithful goats. In fact, if we take Jesus literally, he is suggesting that a single failure to care for the least of these is all it takes to be condemned.

At the same time, a single instance of faithfulness is all it takes to gain salvation. In the end, we come to the realization that all of us are a mix of sheep and goat.

What do we make of that? Well, that is to remind us that we are not here to judge...ourselves or our neighbors. Let Jesus be the judge. Set yourself free of that burden. What is asked of us is to remain faithful in loving God and our neighbor just as Jesus has taught us. That means following the shepherd king to the best of our abilities. That also and most importantly means that we do not procure ourselves salvation by our actions and depend on God’s grace instead. The cross of Christ tells us where the needle leans and it surely leans towards grace. Such is our king.

It is interesting that both the righteous and the unrighteous have the same question in Matthew's gospel. Both ask Jesus, "When was it we saw you hungry or thirsty?" Neither group can recognize Jesus even when he is right in front of them. We train ourselves to see Jesus in the homeless and hungry. Perhaps, we are beginning to accept the idea of seeing Jesus in the incarcerated. But what about those for whom we hold thoughts front-loaded with moralistic judgments such as the substance addicted, the sex worker, the refugee, the undocumented, the stranger? Are we ready to train ourselves to see him in them?

Martin Luther instructed his followers to be "little Christs" to one another. God's people are invited to be Christ and to feed Christ—all at the same time. The risen Lord is not in

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<sup>2</sup> <https://news.abs-cbn.com/blogs/business/11/16/20/how-to-donate-when-your-own-wallet-is-hurting>



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some far away heaven but is present around us every day. Recognizing him in the afflicted and the derelict of the earth makes his second coming all the more tangible.

On Christ the King Sunday we are reminded that the highest and most holy form of power is not coercive and domineering but, rather, self-emptying and servant-like.

The Feast affirms Jesus as our true and legitimate king. All others in power ought to execute their mandate as a reflection of the power granted to them by God. No earthly power is capable of doing fully that. Tyrants and despots don't come even close.

Jesus is a king like no earthly king; he reigns from the cross and his ministry on earth revealed that God's reign operates with an ethic of care for the most vulnerable and most in need of compassion. The Kingdom of God is a new world order, a new age, a promised hope begun in the teaching and ministry of Jesus—and continued in us. In the parables, Jesus never says the Kingdom is totally now or totally later. It's always now-and-not-yet.

When we live within the boundaries of the Kingdom, we live in a "threshold space" between this world and the next. We learn how to live between heaven and earth, one foot in both worlds, holding them precious together. The virtue for living in the in-between times Jesus calls "faith." And it is faith that instructs us to put one step after the other in our journey after the Shepherd King, shouldering our cross in the awareness that believing and behaving like him will usher criticism, ridicule, and persecution.

A glimpse of the New Heaven and New Earth promised by Jesus will reveal to us the suffering faces of those who have already joined the heavenly crowd worshipping around the throne of God: those colonized by imperial powers of both East and West; those stolen from continental Africa and enslaved in the new world; those First Nations dispossessed of their land, their culture, and their language; those lynched and hanging as strange fruits on blood-stained trees for the crime of claiming equality and the right to exist; those deemed inferior on account of their skin color.

Those suffering faces now rejoicing and singing before God compel us to stand for the hope of God's Kingdom to be applied here on Earth.

Who is currently mistreated? Whose turn is it to be ignored? Who is grossly abused? Who has known grief and despair<sup>3</sup> that we should stand for as we would stand for Jesus? A faith that by-passes the suffering of millions is not worthy of our consideration and the consideration of the world. But when we start seeing Jesus in those who suffer

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.elca.org/Our-Work/Relief-and-Development/Lutheran-Disaster-Response>



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and show compassion and solidarity, then our life takes on a new flavor and meaning. That's when our hope is grounded on the vision of the Kingdom and Jesus truly reigns.

With renewed faith and grounded hope, our hearts open and swell and become more and more inclusive. Our love gets refined. Psalm 95 echoes the creation stories and acknowledges that God's reign includes care for the mountains, land, and seas, in addition to all living beings. The creation does not exist merely for our self-serving use at the expense of other creatures and their ecosystems. As God's appointed stewards of creation, we are called to exercise self-emptying and servant-like power in our relationship with the natural world. Our faith becomes cosmic: as we do unto the oceans, atmosphere, and soil, we do unto Christ.

Let us learn anew to value the kind of power that Jesus demonstrated rather than the ego-centered power of chaos, death, and destruction.

Dear heavenly Father, blessed Son and inspiring Holy Spirit, help us through the storms of 2020. Challenge us to serve all people and remind us to withhold judgement. In your name we pray. Amen.