

## **"Power to Choose"**

A Sermon Shared with St. Andrew's United Church

October 28, 2018 at 10:30 a.m.

Scripture Reading: Matthew 25:31-46

by The Rev. Dave Le Grand

Last week, our journey took us into the parable of the Good Samaritan, reminding us to let our gratitude overflow in love.

Today, we enter into an even more challenging story. A story about the consequences of not expressing love. This is one tough parable, and you might wonder: Dave, there doesn't look like much good news there. Jesus leaning close to you and I, staring us in the eyes, saying: *"Whatever you did for the least of these members of my family (the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the unclothed, the ill, and the imprisoned) you did to me."*

There feels like more judgment in this passage, Because I really don't know, *Would Jesus consider me a sheep or a goat?* Honestly, most days, I bounce between being a goat and sheep.

Entire nations are like that, according to Matthew's Jesus. Where he teaches that: "all the nations" will be gathered before him and then he will separate them into sheep and goats. By *all the nations*, is he talking about the Jewish people? Christians? Pagans? Whoever it is, there is a sense of collective judgment based on collective sin and systemic wrong.

Let's focus on the marginalized groups Jesus lists: hungry, thirsty, outcast, ill, unclothed and imprisoned. 2000 years later, *these groups are still in need. We're born into a goat kind of world.* If there is a glimmer of hope in this passage, it is the news that we are also born into a sheep kind of world.

We live in a world where everyday people like you and I, and committed communities, are making a difference. We have the power to choose who we are going to align ourselves with: sheep or goats. We have the power to choose who we want to be. As a judgment story, this notion of a final judgment based on acts of mercy was not new in the Ancient Near East.

But Jesus here in Matthew's Gospel – he is explicit. He sets a high standard. Love that goes above and beyond. Think about it: hungry, thirsty, stranger, unclothed, ill, imprisoned. Caring for sick people then, with lack of health care, you could easily get an infection. Prisons were dirty. Even the perception of sin being transmitted. You keep company with the wrong people – SINFUL.

Discipleship was risky business – it still is, isn't it? It's never been easy to be a sheep who strives to follow a shepherd like Jesus. It's demanding. Yet that's our Christian call, our call to Mission by Jesus, to care for the least as though it is Jesus' very life that hangs in the balance. His life does.

Consider St Andrew's United Church, this congregation as we try to follow the Great Shepherd. I still cannot imagine that time when you, in that important time in recent history, decided to be a host for the Out of the Cold program. Responding to the Shepherd's loving call. In Proverbs 18 it says that, "A gift opens the way and ushers the giver into the presence of the great," [Proverbs 18:16]

True, isn't it? As we give, as we are generous, we are tended to by our Shepherd.

I'm guessing that it isn't difficult to see how Out of the Cold, and the privilege of partnership with the Place, offering hospitality here downtown has been transformative for this congregation.

Our scriptures beckon us to listen. Here, today, I imagine Jesus taking us out of this church and onto the streets ... into the park [pt. out the window behind], that nameless road between Jerusalem and Jericho that we visited last week where a Jewish person lay injured and a reviled Samaritan bystander risked stopping to help.

The street could be in front of your home, or workplace, or it could run through one of your most painful relationships. There is someone on a road somewhere in your life waiting for your gratitude to overflow in love. Imagine who that might be.

Who is on your path that you are going to encounter? Who is hungry in the street of your life – not just hungry for food but hungry for love? Who is naked – not only lacking clothes but deeply vulnerable? Who is the stranger, the outcast? Who is lonely? Doesn't fit in? Who is sick – sick in their body, their mind, their spirit? Who is in prison – a literal prison, or imprisoned in their thought, or imprisoned by shame or grief? Who is your shepherd leading you to?

Right now, in this moment when Jesus is calling you & I to listen, to draw nearer, and we have the power to choose who each of us wants to become. We, as a congregation, have the power to choose who we are going to be, what our central values will be. Will we have the courage to risk participating in God's creation of a new vision, a kin-dom on earth as it is in heaven?

Kingdom – I call it kin-dom, because kingdoms have baggage –We might think it is something in the future, even when life ends, When the world ends and Jesus comes back to restore things Scholars say that, when Jesus speaks of kin-dom, he is thinking also about the here and now. *Today as well as in the future.*

Let me be clear, I don't think Jesus is at all interested in separating sheep from goats. He wants to motivate followers to get on board with God, to build God's kin-dom here in this life: a radical vision of love, generosity, compassion. That prayer Jesus taught – "thy kingdom come on earth as in heaven."

The good news is: Jesus leads us as individuals and as community to encounter him in the least we meet, and the lost. We have a choice...And when we choose well, I think that we feel it in our heart. We know we are on the right path. Remember, calls are not just for paid clergy like me. Martin Luther, a Roman Catholic priest whose courageous, truthful, action helped catalyze Protestantism believed in what he called the Priesthood of all believers. Christ beckons all of us, in different ways. Mission in

this United Church of Canada of ours. Courageous. Principled. Would you join with me in reciting our New Creed, which is not very new anymore. But very powerful words:

We are not alone, we live in God's world.  
We believe in God: who has created and is creating,  
who has come in Jesus, the Word made flesh,  
to reconcile and make new, who works in us and others  
by the Spirit.

We trust in God.  
We are called to be the Church: to celebrate God's presence,  
to live with respect in Creation, to love and serve others,  
to seek justice and resist evil,  
to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen,  
our judge and our hope.

In life, in death, in life beyond death,  
God is with us.  
We are not alone.  
Thanks be to God.

\*\*Taken from a sermon by the Rev Trisha Elliott in the 2018 "Called to Be the Church"  
congregational giving program. This year's theme: *Loving Our Neighbours*