

I shudder to think back to the time when
 the gym teacher told captains to pick teams.
 For good players, choosing teams was exciting.
 For me, it was always an embarrassment.
 I was usually one of the last picks
 for any sport that involved a ball.
 I grew up near-sighted
 but didn't get glasses until I was 14.
 I developed no skill in catching, aiming,
 or throwing a ball.
 So I usually waited and waited to be picked.
 Sometimes I was saved by the class bell.
 Other players were better than me.
 That's just the way it was.
 By not learning to handle a ball,
 I chose my hell.

Jesus, by setting his sights on Jerusalem,
 knowing that there will be resistance
 and his own death there, chooses his hell.
 But that choice is necessary for salvation.
 Early in the gospel according to Matthew,
 Jesus tells the befuddled disciples:
 The Son of Man is going to come
 in the Father's glory with his angels,
 and then the Son will reward each person
 according to what she or he has done.
 We don't know when this will happen,
 but Christians have always believed
 that Jesus Christ will come again,
 to judge the living and the dead.
 The church calls this event the Last Judgment.
 It will mark the end of human rule of earth
 and the full reign of the Kingdom of Heaven.
 We celebrate the Last Judgment on the
 last Sunday of the Christian Year.
 That's today.
 We call it Christ the King Sunday.
 And it gives us a chance to look back
 on the Gospel of Matthew where we have
 walked with Jesus for the last 12 months.

The figurative language in today's lesson
 is about a moment of truth
 for all the nations of the world.
 Like a shepherd sorting the flock,
 Christ the King will put the sheep on the right
 and the goats on the left.
 All people who ever lived will spend eternity
 in one status or the other:
 either in God's presence (the sheep)
 or in separation from God (the goats).
 Eternal exile from God is one definition of hell.
 By avoiding persons in distress,
 among other things,
 Goats experience hell for eternity.
 The sheep, in many cases, minister to people
 in hells of human need.
 The Hells We Choose.
 For some people, the picture of Jesus
 separating sheep from goats is a scary idea.
 In the parable, there is no in-between.
 We will be one or the other, for all eternity.
 This picture doesn't have to be scary.
 In fact, I hope to convince you
 that the Last Judgment is actually something
 you and I can look forward to,
 like the best Christmas present of all time.
 We're coming up on the Christmas season.
 Some of you will not escape without attending
 or viewing a performance of Charles Dickens'
 “A Christmas Carol.”
 The central figure is Ebenezer Scrooge.
 He is miserly, cheerless,
 and proud of his self-reliance.
 That is the hell he chooses.
 In a nightmare, old Scrooge
 is given a chance to see his own Goat-ness,
 past, present, and future.
 After the grand tour, Scrooge repents.
 He awakens, overjoyed that it's Christmas Day.
 He makes amends.
 And all live happily ever after.

None of us is goat-like one day
and sheep-like the next, as Scrooge.
We are complex creatures,
behavioral hybrids of goat and sheep.
We must not peg *ourselves* one or the other,
much less judge other people.
That’s Christ’s job.

The Good News is that we can depend
on Christ to be merciful.
He felt the same tugs and pulls of life as us.
Moreover, Christ lays out a heavenly path
we can choose to follow our whole life long.
It’s a narrow path, to be sure. Jesus teaches:

“enter through the narrow gate,
for wide is the gate and broad is the road
that leads to destruction,
and many enter through it.
But small is the gate and narrow the path
that leads to eternal life,
and only a few find it.”

Jesus says many things that help us understand
exactly what he means by the narrow path
that leads to the Kingdom of Heaven.

Most of them are in the Beatitudes,
the first part of the first sermon Jesus preaches.
Consider how the Beatitudes prepare us
for today’s parable of sheep and goats:

Blessed are the **poor in spirit**,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who **mourn**,
for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the **meek**,
for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and
thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.

Blessed are the **merciful**,
for they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the **pure in heart**,
for they will see God.

So Jesus advises sheep to be modest and humble.

To presume that you are a sheep is neither.
But there’s no point dwelling on the question,
because in the end the real sheep are
surprised:

‘Lord, *when* did we see you hungry
and feed you,
or thirsty and give you
something to drink?

When did we see you a stranger
and invite you in,
or needing clothes and clothe you?

When did we see you sick or in prison
and go to visit you?’

Jesus says to the Sheep, ‘I tell you the truth,
whatever you did for one of the least of these
brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’

In other words, sheep don’t think
they’ve done anything special.

They are humbly following the shepherd.
Furthermore in the Beatitudes, Jesus says,

Blessed are the **merciful**.

Mercy is sympathy, compassion, and kindness.
Our lesson keeps repeating a litany of mercies:

... you gave me something to eat,
... you gave me something to drink,
... you invited me in,
... you clothed me,
... you looked after me,
... you came to visit me.’

When we show mercy in these ways,
we serve Jesus himself.

Jesus identifies with the needy, the sick, and
the ostracized throughout his public ministry.

Showing mercy emulates Jesus,
the good shepherd.

In short:

sheep act with humility and compassion.

Neither pride nor apathy are sheep-like qualities.

What else does Jesus say about the things
we should not do?

One bad behavior is hurting other people with our words, like when we're angry. We may say hurtful things when we're angry. Well before the parable of goats and sheep, Jesus has some strong words about anger:

“You have heard that it was said to the people of old, ‘You shall not kill’ and ‘Whoever kills will have to face judgment.’ But I say to you, Whoever stays angry with a brother or sister will have to face judgment. And whoever says to a brother or a sister, ‘You idiot,’ will have to face the supreme court; and whoever says, ‘You jerk!’ will have to face the fire of hell.”

Jesus wants us to be sorry for that and ask for forgiveness. That way, Jesus can show mercy to us and help us stay on the narrow path. Okay. Suppose I have been humble. Suppose I have shown mercy. Suppose I have apologized when I hurt anyone. Does that make me a Sheep? Maybe not! Here's a paraphrase of what Jesus says about goats:

. . . you gave me nothing to eat,
not so much as a scrap of food.
. . . you gave me nothing to drink,
not so much as a cup of water.
. . . you did not clothe me,
not even a hand-me-down sweater.
. . . you did not look after me,
not even a text message or a Hallmark card.

Remember the story of the Good Samaritan? One person after another passes by an injured man on the road. They are good people. But they see a need and do nothing. That's what Jesus is talking about – knowing that someone is in need and doing nothing.

Jesus is telling us that God wants us to pay special attention to people who are less fortunate than we. Are there people in need in this congregation? You bet. There are people in need in this neighborhood. Indeed, most of the world's population is hungry or thirsty, homeless or poorly dressed, sick or in prison. The number one reason is poverty. The great American campaigner against poverty was Dorothy Day, born in 1897. Day spent a lifetime advocating for the poor. One of her early memories was the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and her mother offering to help quake victims. She rejected organized religion in college because she didn't see very many “religious people” helping the poor. She first went to jail with a group of suffragists in 1917 who were demonstrating at the White House in favor of giving women voting rights. She became a Roman Catholic in 1928 after the birth of her daughter within a common-law marriage. She became a single parent who supported herself as a free-lance journalist. In the midst of the Depression, she started a weekly newspaper, The Catholic Worker, with friend Peter Maurin. Issued 7 times a year, circulation today stands at 80,000. (The cover price is still a penny. A year's subscription is available for 25 cents.) In the 1930s she opened her first Settlement House for homeless immigrants. Today over 200 Catholic Worker communities operate in 32 states and 8 foreign countries.

One of them is Sister Peter Claver House in North Philadelphia, a Catholic Worker community extending hospitality to its neighbors in the form of an after school program, a food and clothing distribution program, and a summer youth program. True to Dorothy Day, Catholic Workers are committed to nonviolence, voluntary poverty, prayer, and care for the exiled, hungry, and forsaken. Out of love borne of faith, Catholic Workers live and work among the poor.

CONCLUSION

I said at the start that I hoped to convince you that the Last Judgment is good news, like Christmas. Well, here's the main point: We can't earn our way into heaven. The opportunity of heaven will be a surprise, a gift, an inheritance we didn't expect. But we can earn our way into hell. Hell exists as certainly as Last Judgment awaits. Hell is a condition chosen by those who lay claim to God's love as if it's for them only. We can spend eternity in isolation from God. Or we can enter into the hell of peoples' lives. Those are The Hells We Choose. Spend eternity in poverty of spirit, hunger for love, and alienation from God. Or identify with poverty, physical hunger, and personal alienation the way the Catholic Worker movement does. Mercy and humility do not come naturally to us, any more than throwing and catching a ball. We all make many goat-like decisions along the way.

But faith in Jesus, faith in the forgiveness that only the Son of God can bestow, provides the potential to overcome our selfish, sinful natures. Faith fills us to overflowing with love so that sharing God's love is our only choice. Amen.