
Sheep on the Right, Goats on the Left

A sermon by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
Last Sunday after Pentecost - Year A

[unedited transcript:]

Sheep on the right. Goats on the left. This is where we find ourselves. We have finally gotten to the fourth of the hard sayings in the gospel of Matthew. We started with faithful and wicked servants. We then learned about wise and foolish bridesmaids. We picked up the pace when we got to enterprising and fearful stewards. And here we are, sheep on the right, goats on the left.

Now, the message of all of this seems absolutely clear. Judgment day is coming. You all know what to do. Some of you will do it. Some of you will not. Those who do it will be rewarded, and those who don't will be punished. It makes you want to fall to your knees and say, Oh God, please don't make me a goat. And yet, that might miss the real meaning of these hard teachings.

Sometimes as we go through these teachings, we focus on God's judgment. I had a friend who's actually a Scottish priest that I was introducing to the South for the first time. We were riding down the rural highways. I forgot where we were going, but the signs seemed to be unending. You know the ones, all announcing God's judgment. God is coming. Hell is real. Are you ready? Finally, after a couple of hours, my friend looked at me and without any preface said, "George, God must be really tired here."

But other times we focus on the mercy of God. We remember the story of the prodigal son. We think of the forgiveness policy of 70 times seven. We remember that we are never separated from God. It is this being loved and held, which is at the core of one of my favorite stories in children's literature, *The Velveteen Rabbit*. You may remember that story where the skin horse says to the Velveteen rabbit, who thinks that he is no longer worthy because the boys and playing with them and the mechanical toys are so sophisticated. And the skin horse says, "What makes you real is not how you were built. What makes you real is being loved." Sometimes this takes most of your life and you may lose your hair and have parts that don't work. But when you are loved, you will become real, and when you are real, you will always be real.

God's mercy, God's mercy, and God's judgment. Which one are these stories talking about? Well, it may not surprise you to learn that I think they're talking about both of them. I think it's a paradox. It's the same paradox that exists between heaven and hell. We have a difficult time resolving that paradox, which is why we sometimes struggle with our images of God. We don't want to be worshiping, as I said, up before a petty tyrant. We want to be able to count on the all encompassing love.

But what if it is in fact, a paradox? I mean, look at the standard for the separation in this story. The sheep have cared for the least of our brothers. They have fed them. They have given them drink. They have visited them in prison. They visited them when they were sick. The goats have not done these things. When the sheep did them, they did them to Christ. When the goats did not do them, they did not do them to Christ. But what's interesting is neither side had any clue what they had done. It wasn't as if they were running with a scorecard, taking off their virtuous acts, achieving their salvation. No, it wasn't so much about what they did. They didn't even know it. I think it was about who they are. I think they are the sheep, if you will, the ones on the right, that group are the people who give themselves to others, who give themselves a way. They aren't just me or I. They are also, we. They have been saved to the extent they know how to love other people

The goats on the other hand are just a me or an I. They are not a we. They have no sense of belonging to a

larger group, of feeling responsible for others, of having a sense of acting in a way that while may giving up their freedom is nevertheless protective of the security of others.

Paul talks about this characteristic in his letter to the Philippians. He calls it taking on the mind of Christ, and this is what he says about Jesus. "Though his state was that of God, yet he did not dream equality with God to be something to cling to. Rather, he emptied himself and assuming the state of a slave was born in human likeness. He being known as one of us, humbled himself, a beading unto death, even death on the cross. For this God, raised him on high and bestowed on him the name, which is above every other name." To take on the mind of Christ is to give yourself away, to recognize that you were part of a we and not just a me.

Now, the rule of Saint Benedict picks up a similar theme when it says we us and by descending. There is no other way. There is no other way. That's what makes you real, giving yourself away to others. So you can see how this economy of exchange works. Those who recognize they have received mercy who have been loved, who have become real in the words of the skin horse, then give that away to others, right? They love other people. They care for other people. They feel responsible to and for other people. They have a sense of the we.

But what does that have to do with heaven and hell? I think heaven and hell are not two different places. They're not even two different states. It's all one reality. It is all part of God. The difference is how we perceive it. Some people, the sheep are able to perceive the presence of God, to withstand the blinding light of the unmediated presence of the divine. Whereas the goats are not. They have not prepared themselves. They've not given themselves in a way that gives them a sense of the presence of God, and they cannot stand the blinding light.

Think for example of the Luken's story of Lazarus and The Rich Man. You remember the rich man has stepped over Lazarus and avoided him and ignored him all of his life. They both die. They go down to where the dead are and they're both in the same place. They can see each other and they can see Abraham. But the rich man cannot rest in the bosom of Abraham as Lazarus does. He is still a me. There's no sense of we with him. He doesn't know how to give himself away. He doesn't really know how to love other people. He doesn't know what it means to be merciful, or if you think about the 6B attitude, he does not have a purity of heart and therefore cannot see God.

Heaven and hell are part of one reality. The judgment is whether we can perceive the presence of God that is there. When we can perceive that, we can experience that, but it's not something God does for us. God is always present. God doesn't judge us in the sense of punishing us for our sins. It is our sins that punish us. God does not punish us for our sins. It is our sins that punish us.

Origin, a third century Egypt thinker, said it this way, "The same sun that melts wax, hardens mud. The same sun that melts wax, hardens mud." I think there is mercy in God's presence and I think there is judgment, but it's not something God is doing to us. It's something that we do to ourselves. We have made choices throughout our life, little choices to move closer to or farther from God, and those choices build on themselves. And we literally become different people over time, just as the skin horse said

And so if we become the kind of people who can receive mercy and give mercy, then we will receive our reward because we will perceive the presence of God and be able to live into it. It won't feel like death to us, but if we have not done that work, if we have not expanded our capacity to perceive God, then despite God's presence and invitation and mercy, we will feel judgment, because we will not be able to experience the life of God into which we have been called. We are not judged for our sins. Our sins create their own judgment

To give you another image of this from literature, children's literature as it were, I want to now pull from CS Lewis and the Chronicles of Narnia. You will remember that the God figure, the Christ figure in the Chronicles is Aslan, a wonderful, great lion. And if you've read the Chronicles, you may remember that in the last scene in the last battle, the book The Last Battle, as lion stands before a door with his shadow casting over the side, he just stands there and all of the beasts of the kingdom come rushing at him all eager to see him transfixed as it were by his face as if they can't turn away. But what happens to them as they see Aslan's face, is that their expression changes. Almost instantaneously, some of them feel fear and anger.

And what happens to them is they go off to Aslan's left side. And if they had been a talking animal, they ceased to be a talking animal and become a normal animal. They have received the invitation, but they have rejected the invitation because of who they were, maybe not even realizing they had received it. But the other group of animals, the animals that looked into Aslan's face and were invited into his presence and accepted the invitation began to glow and move off to Aslan's right side and through a doorway into another dimension of life. Those that rejected Aslan were never seen again, and those who went into the doorway went into a

deeper, richer life.

Heaven and hell, I think are one reality. All of life is one reality and God is present in all of it. There is no part of it where God is not present, even that of outer darkness and weeping and gnashing of teeth. The differences in who we are and whether we can perceive and live into the presence of God. Mercy and judgment are both there properly understood. God's mercy extends to us as it extended to the prodigal son without ceasing. God's judgment is there to the extent that the truth is the truth, and we may judge ourselves by refusing God's invitation.

I want to close then with another CS Lewis quote, this one from *The Great Divorce*, his book about heaven and hell. And Lewis says this, "There are two kinds of people in the world. Those who say to God, thy will be done and those to whom God says, thy will be done." Sheep on the right. Goats on the left. Mercy and judgment. Will we give of ourselves so that we can accept the invitation to have them both and to live in to the life of God? Can we move from being a me to being a we, giving ourselves to other people so that we are able at the end to have the humility to say to God, thy will be done. Sheep on the right. Goats on the left. As it turns out, the choice is ours. Amen.