

Am I Sheep?

Micah 6:1-8; Matthew 25:31-40

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In the summer of 2020 Lewinsville Presbyterian Church made the choice to become a Matthew 25 congregation- which was a new initiative in the Presbyterian Church USA... I'm gonna need you to forgive me- because I'm gonna get a little church nerdy for a second- but I promise that I will be quick... so at the General Assembly (which is a large church convention in which elected church leaders from all over the country gather to vote and decide on things for the whole denomination) at the 2016 and 2018 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) voted and affirmed that the Presbyterian Church would strive to become a denomination with Matthew 25 at its core- meaning we are encouraged to become a church that boldly and compassionately serves people who are hungry, oppressed, imprisoned or poor.... On the PCUSA website we are told that by accepting the Matthew 25 invitation, we help our denomination become a more relevant presence in the world. That we join other congregations to recognize Christ's urgent call to be a church of action, where God's love, justice and mercy shine forth and is contagious.

Our church accepted the call in the summer of 2020 to become a Matthew 25 congregation meaning that we have committed to three things:

- To Strive to build congregation vitality
- To Work to eradicate poverty
- Be Committed to Dismantling Structural racism....

And so... starting today... we are beginning a three-part deep dive into the very Scripture which our denomination has placed at its core. The purpose of this sermon series is to gain an understanding as to why this specific scripture has become a defining scripture for our denomination and congregation and to understand what it has to do with congregational vitality, eradicating poverty, and dismantling structural racism. I encourage everyone, including myself, to come to this text with an openness to hear the words of Jesus, to let go of previous assumptions, and know that Jesus' words have the ability to challenge all of us- no matter our political or personal backgrounds.

The text which Rachel read today is the first half of a parable; you will hear the rest of it over the next two weeks. This particular parable is an intense sort of parable; it does not bring up the loving warm feelings that a parable like the one about the prodigal son might bring up, rather, if you read Matthew 25 and feel concerned, I think you are reading it correctly. Jesus is intentionally telling a troubling parable. In fact the whole of Matthew 25 is composed of three parables all of which have a somber overtones, harsh judgments, and ask tough questions of its reader. The parable we are focusing on in this sermon series is actually the third parable in the series. And I want to point out that in the story arch of the Gospel of Matthew this chapter

falls right before Jesus goes to Jerusalem where he will be arrested, tried, and executed... so as far as storytelling goes this chapter is foreshadowing what is to come

Our parable opens with:

*“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. **32** All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. **33** He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.*

The parable is a judgment scene in which all people, from all nations, are gathered for their final judgment. I don't know about you but images of all humanity standing before a throne to be judged at the end of time is not necessarily a dreamy thought- in fact it sort of makes my stomach hurt thinking about it. Getting judged a sort of lifetime report card on how my time spent in life went, sounds terrifying.. And as we read on, we see that the final judgment is a separating, a sorting of folks, as a Shepard sorts sheep from the goats. Sheep to the right and Goats to the left. *But I have good news for you. TODAY we get to focus on the sheep!! I'm gonna leave the goats to Jen next week!*

The sheep are judged and welcomed into the kingdom of God because they fed, clothed, visited and cared for Jesus when he was sick, in prison, hungry, and thirsty. However, “the sheep” are confused by this proclamation saying, “when did this happen?” and Jesus says if you do this for the least of these, you do it for me. Here Jesus *is saying don't look for me among the most dignified, wealthy, or noble in your community. Rather find me with the vulnerable, the sick, the outcast, the incarcerated, the condemned, and I think it is important to note that literally in the very next chapter of this book, this is where you find Jesus, by the end of Matthew 26 Jesus will have been betrayed by a close friend, left as an outcast by his disciples to pray alone. Jesus will be arrested, he will be tried, and he will be judged guilty, he will be beaten.* There is a history of interpretation with Matthew 25 to see Jesus instruction here as an encouragement to “bring Jesus” to the vulnerable or see this parable as a morality checklist; yup did some good charity, check! I'm good to go. I'm getting an A at that final judgment! But there is a nuanced difference because here Jesus is saying to find me in our world you must look to the margins. Jesus self identifies as the sick, the hungry, the thirsty, the outcast, the incarcerated, and the betrayed.

This week I've been doing some research about Sheep wondering why it might be that our gospel writer chooses sheep as the “good ones”. Wondering what is about sheep that Jesus is lifting up. Commonly sheep are used to refer to people who are not intelligent, or someone might be called a sheep if they are quick to follow a leader without thinking for themselves. There is even a derogatory word “*sheeple*” that is used to describe people who thoughtlessly follow new trends. But I don't think this is why Jesus is using the reference to sheep in this text. First off there is a rich history throughout both the Old and New Testament to use the image of sheep (sheep play an important role in Yom Kippur and other Jewish festivals) and there is an abundance of references to God as the Good shepherd, and the folks Jesus is telling this parable to most likely had more interactions with sheep than us modern readers and would have

understood the characteristics of sheep and goats. So what I have learned about sheep is that they are incredibly communal animals. Sheep cannot survive alone; they must be in community with other sheep to survive. In fact, while grazing they like to have at least 4-5 sheep in their line of vision. A sheep will become incredibly agitated and scared if separated from its herd. Also, Sheep have emotional intelligence and know when a fellow sheep is scared, happy, or calm. These emotional connections are what forge a strong bond among the sheep. One farmer I found states: "Although many think of their flocking instinct to be a sign of "dumbness," it is in fact a community-based survival mechanism where they have learned that their strength is much greater in numbers and their comfort and survival is enhanced as a group rather than as an individual."

I wonder if the strong communal nature of sheep is why Jesus is using them as an example to emulate. It seems that sheep understand something that us humans often struggle to understand. That we are all one and what happens to you affects me. That my freedom is wrapped up in your freedom, that my justice is wrapped up in your justice, that my health is contingent upon your health meaning that if I see one of my human siblings hungry, thirsty, condemned, or abused that is an act against us all.

One of my hero's in life is a man named Brian Stevenson- a civil rights attorney and author, who wrote the book *Just Mercy*. There is a movie with the same title, but as per usual the book is better than the movie. In *Just Mercy* Mr. Stevenson writes about what working with folks on death row has taught him... and he says:

"Proximity has taught me some basic and humbling truths, including this vital lesson: Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done. My work with the poor and the incarcerated has persuaded me that the opposite of poverty is not wealth; the opposite of poverty is justice. Finally, I've come to believe that the true measure of our commitment to justice, the character of our society, our commitment to the rule of law, fairness, and equality cannot be measured by how we treat the rich, the powerful, the privileged, and the respected among us. The true measure of our character is how we treat the poor, the disfavored, the accused, the incarcerated, and the condemned."

"We are all implicated when we allow other people to be mistreated. An absence of compassion can corrupt the decency of a community, a state, a nation. Fear and anger can make us vindictive and abusive, unjust and unfair, until we all suffer from the absence of mercy and we condemn ourselves as much as we victimize others. I believe it's necessary to recognize that we all need mercy, we all need justice, and-perhaps-we all need some measure of unmerited grace."¹

And I think this is what we learn from the sheep. Sheep somehow intrinsically understand that they are all one body, connected together, and that whatever happens to one sheep happens to the group, and so they are motivated to care for the whole and not just for the individual self. A selfish sheep is impossible. Which is why the people who were sorted as

¹ (Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy*)

sheep had somehow inadvertently cared for Jesus. They are the ones who saw their fellow humans in need and they responded.

On May 25, 2020 (an event occurred that I'm sure many of you remember) a man named George Floyd attempted to purchase a pack of cigarettes with a counterfeit \$20.00 bill in Minneapolis which instigated a call to the police that then led to the murder of George Floyd when a Police Officer named Derrick Chauvin knelt on his neck for more than 9 minutes. This event sparked a protest and civil unrest throughout our country and world. In response to this murder protest erupted in over 2,000 cities across our globe. Anecdotally, I know that after the death of Mr. Floyd there was a shift among white people, and particularly white congregations, to begin thinking more deeply about race, and folks began to be a bit more curious about how something like this could happen. I know many churches who started offering book discussions and lectures about Anti Racism in the aftermath of Mr. Floyd's death. And we can be honest that even our congregation responded in this way; it was the following summer that we became a Matthew 25 congregation.

One of the reasons that this event had the impact that it did was because of cloud of witnesses, the community of sheep, who surround George Floyd on this day-

Charles McMillian, a curious neighbor who saw the commotion and knew something was wrong and refused to leave the scene. Charles is last person Mr. Floyd spoke to while on this earth. While testifying at Chauvin's trial McMillan broke down in tears recounting the experience.

Donald Williams, a father and Martial Arts Instructor who was going to the store to get a cold drink when seeing the event felt compelled to get involved. Because of his martial arts training he knew that the actions Chauvin were taking were fatal, and on video recording you can hear Donald pleading with the officers to stop and demanding that Chauvin get off of Mr. Floyd.

Jenna Scurry, the 911 dispatcher who saw Chauvin's actions on security cameras and knew something was wrong. She was so disturbed that she called her supervisor to report the incident, something she had never done before.

Genevie Hansen, an off-duty firefighter walking by, immediately knew something was wrong and that Mr. Floyd was in peril. She asked to begin CPR on Mr. Floyd, but was not allowed access by the police.

Darnella Fraizier, a teenager who was nearby, courageously decided to film the event. Her action of filming the murderous scene is why any of us know about this murder. Darnella was awarded a special journalism award by the Pulitzer Prize board. The committee said they honored Ms. Frazier for "courageously recording the murder of George Floyd, highlighting the crucial role of citizens in journalists' quest for truth and justice."

I believe that these witnesses, Charles, Donald, Jenna, Genevie, Darnella, took the action of the sheep. They saw one of their flock, rejected, harmed, incarcerated, beaten, and moved toward him, desperately wanting to rescue him from danger and bring him to safety. And I

think the reaction many across the world had is that part of our humanity that is like the sheep to respond knowing that the injustice done to Mr. Floyd was not just an action of harm to him, but to all of us, to our community of humanity.

An absence of compassion can corrupt the decency of a community, a state, a nation. Fear and anger can make us vindictive and abusive, unjust and unfair, until we all suffer from the absence of mercy, and we condemn ourselves as much as we victimize others.

The events of Mr. Floyd's murder were so horrific that it was difficult for anyone to watch what happened and not get angry, not feel motivated to action. But we are called to respond to our fellow humanity even when the atrocities are not so blatant or obvious. The murder of Mr. Floyd was not a one-off event; rather it followed many deaths of black, indigenous and people of color at the hands of law enforcement.

I wanted to bring us back to the murder of Mr. Floyd because, for many (especially in white communities) this event was a turning point, a beginning, a moment when people could no longer ignore the truth that certain people (often along racial lines) are dehumanized and victimized. This was a moment when they realized that the world is not as they thought it was, though I have to say that many of our black and brown brothers and sisters have been telling us this truth for years. But There was something about this moment that opened people's ears to hear. And I think it is important to remember and not to let the passing years dull the pain. I wanted to go back to Mr. Floyd's death to remind us what is at stake, that this call to keep Matthew 25 at our center, is important and urgent. The world needs us to be about the work of the sheep; it is a matter of life and death.

Another detail about sheep that Jesus was certainly calling us to remember is the role that sheep play throughout the Old Testament in Sacrifice. It was a sheep that Abraham sacrificed instead of his son Isaac, it was sheep's blood painted on the door post in the exodus story, and it was sheep that were sacrificed yearly on Yom Kippur, the day of Atonement. Meaning that to be a congregation of sheep will also demand sacrifice on our part- the sacrifice of our individuality, our ideology, or our ways of seeing in the world. To be a congregation of sheep is to take off the mantle of individuality and pick up the mantle of solidarity with the vulnerable *to move towards and be with the sick, the outcast, the incarcerated, the condemned.*

Earlier I told you that as a Matthew 25 congregation we commit to three things

- To Strive to build congregation vitality
- To Work to eradicate poverty
- Be Committed to Dismantling Structural racism

We are committed to congregational vitality because we must be a vital congregation to be able to accomplish any of the work we are called to in the world. We must have a healthy and working congregation so that we are able to work towards justice, compassion, and mercy in this world.

We are committed to working towards the eradication of poverty because we take the words of Jesus seriously in this parable to help the most vulnerable.

We are committed to dismantling structural racism because the racist structures of our world and society mean that black, Indigenous, and people of color are disproportionately the ones who are forced to the margins to be the sick, the hungry, the outcast, the incarcerated, and the condemned.

As a Matthew 25 church: Our denomination calls us to: “serve Jesus by contributing to the well-being of the most vulnerable in society: sharing our possessions with people who are deprived of adequate food and clean drinking water; offering hospitality to people who need warm clothing and safe shelter; and providing assistance for people who lack access to medical care or languish in prison. As the prophet Micah might say, when we do justice, show kindness, and walk humbly alongside people in such situations, we do what is right and good in the sight of the Lord (Micah 6:8). This means recognizing the image of God and the presence of Christ in the faces of our neighbors — particularly neighbors in need — and then honoring God’s image and Christ’s presence by loving our neighbors as ourselves.”²

Amen:

Let us Pray:

Come quickly, Holy God, in power and glory, to establish your realm of justice and peace; and make us ready, on that day, to stand before you, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

² (<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/M25-21-02-Bible-Study-God-With-Us-in-Jesus-Eng.pdf>)