

## “What We Do Next”

Lewinsville Presbyterian Church

Matthew 25:31-46

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So today we will talk about the Goats, the cautionary tale of the passage. As Pastor Layne outlined last week, this reading joins the two cautionary tales in the first two thirds of Matthew 25, the two parables of the ten bridesmaids and the talent. Here is a moment from the end of each of those: bridesmaids late with their oil bang on the door to be let in and are told, “I don’t know you.” A coin is ripped from the hand of a servant described as worthless who is then sent to the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then next, the goats get put on the left to be chastised before going away to the eternal fire... prepared for the devil. And what is terrifying to me about all three of these outcomes is that I do what precipitated them all the time, so maybe you do too. The bridesmaids were forgetful: they remembered the lamp but were unprepared because they forgot the oil; the servant was afraid, specifically to take a risk so he buried a coin instead of the chance of losing it; and the goats just missed it. They don’t even know what they didn’t do. The bridesmaids, servant and goats join us in what we said earlier in this service, “we confess that we have sinned by what we have left undone.” And they join us in what we pray together most weeks, “forgive us our debts.” All three – forgetful, afraid, missed moments, are things left undone, they are passive debts not active trespasses. If I have a choice in how I am judged? I choose by trespasses. Make a list of all the intentional, active pain I have caused and it will not be short, because “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” but it will also not be *endless*, like my list of what I have forgotten, what fear has kept me from doing, what I don’t do that I know I should, let alone what I don’t even see, what I still don’t know I missed.

These passages are not easy, and I imagine when Jesus finishes speaking them his listeners sit in stunned silence, then turn the gears to ask, “where do I want to be in this passage?” Inside the door with full lamps of oil, employed and abundantly trusted by the Master, and on the right in eternal life. But then the panic worry sets in, “is that where I actually am?” Someone might ask Pastor Layne’s sermon title from last week rather happily, “Am I a Sheep?” A whole different tone shows up when we ask, “Am I a Goat?” Am I outside the door, in the outer darkness, in the same category as the devil? Those difficult questions are Jesus’ point in Matthew 25, because, simply, Jesus is serious about the expectations he has for your life and our life together, and then, he wants you to do something in response. These words shake us out of complacency so that we recalibrate our life, reorient to the truth and return to the way of Jesus. Words meant to alarm, to push us to evaluate our discipleship so that we *do something next*.

The kind of “next” that the Ninevites do in Chapter 3, after the reluctant prophet Jonah finally makes his way to deliver the word of the Lord to them. Words they do not

receive casually, but perhaps in stunned silence, then identification, then panic worry about the implication, then a dramatic change of course. Fasting, sackcloth, cries of lament to God, turning from evil and renouncing the violence that was in their very hands. Not just the people, the animals too – they took this so seriously they covered their animals in sackcloth. I can only imagine. It's a good list of what to do next after hearing the Matthew passage as well, maybe not wrangling our animals into sackcloth, but maybe because sackcloth was traditionally made from.... Goat hair! The Ninevite's next included internal – fasting, and external – sackcloth, confessional – lament to God, repentance – turning from evil and restoration – dropping the violence from their hands to free their hands for what comes next.

All of that from only eight words “forty more days and Ninevah will be overthrown” (actually only five in the Hebrew.) They don't get specific instructions about what they aren't doing and what they are supposed to do, but they get the point that they missed it, it is serious, and they immediately respond. Their “next” looks different because of those five words. And our next looks different because of the words of Matthew 25 and our denominational and congregational focus on them. Luckily, we get more than five words and they are more specific about what is left undone. Not as a checklist to cross off as you do them, fed the hungry – check, gave thirsty a drink – check, welcome/clothes/visited – check, check, check. That would be a very goat-like way of approaching it. I am wary of making too many assumptions about the goats, yet it seems pretty clear that they would have checked those boxes if they knew it was about the Lord, that doing so would be advantageous to them in some way. If it benefited, advanced or made them look good. Maybe a tax write-off? A compelling college essay? If the goats got an additional line here, it would be, “I mean, if we'd known it was you Lord, of course we never would have left that undone.”

We know what the goats didn't, so how does our next look different? Fasting? Wearing goat hair sackcloth next week? Maybe not. But maybe following the three-fold progression of confession, repentance and restoration. And applying that specifically to our church's Matthew 25 commitment to dismantling structural racism. Pastor Layne helped us understand how the least of these and dismantling structural racism connect. Not that we look at black, indigenous and people of color as least, for that would be a great evil. Not even that we consider them the least because they are statistically more likely to be in the categories of Matthew 25 of the sick, poor, outcast and incarcerated, even though that is true. But because those truths have a systemic cause – our country's discriminatory and racist laws that began with enslavement and lasted 350 years, meant to make and keep them the least in our society. Black, indigenous, people of color are the statistical least in many of the categories of Matthew 25 because people in charge of policy did that on purpose. It is even accurate to say that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 ended all race-based discrimination – it outlawed it and provided an avenue for legal challenge – but even if it did the minute it was passed, that is 58 verse 350 years. And not even that long ago, I bet more people listening to this sermon were alive in 1964 than not.

I am wary about assuming too much about the goats, but what if, as we relate this passage to anti-racism, they leave so much undone because if they really saw Jesus in the

people their country designated as least for so long, and in the purpose of how it happened, they would be compelled to do something next. And that would undo so much of their own narrative – about what they earned, and deserve, the story of their own family’s struggle and success. About how they aren’t actively trespassing against people – they don’t say racist things and don’t kill people like the McMichael father and son, so the legacies of systems they didn’t create are not their problem. Because if it is their problem, there is much to be done.

Here is something that undoes me: It is a historical fact that racist policies benefited my grandparent’s home ownership, both sets, which I know because I did the research on discriminatory lending practices in their neighborhoods. Less than 100 years ago, New Deal governmental agencies, HOLC, FHA and the VA, created color-coded maps for every metropolitan area in the country to designate mortgage risk. The survey in the late 1930s said the following about the houses, designated green, where my parents grew up: “restrictions prevent an encroachment of lower class of occupants.” “neighboring areas occupied by the better type of colored people.” That one was listed as a “detrimental influence” – each listing had that category along with others like “infiltrations” which is as bad as you imagine it to be. Here is what it said about the closest redlined neighborhood to my family, areas deemed too high risk to receive loans, in one case five blocks away and in another ¼ mile, “heavy colored population, smoke and dirt from railroad” – no loan there, and this one needs a deep breath before reading, “It is 100% poor class Negroes practically all on relief. A high wall prevents their spread.” That doesn’t sound like a description of human beings but a contagion.

The value of my grandparents’ homes has mattered to the financial future of my children. Four generations with safety nets and savings because two high school teachers in the 1940s could get a loan for a house across from a park. Five blocks away, I can imagine four generations of hunger, thirst, outcast and incarceration. Sometimes that just undoes me, makes me wonder if the violence is in my very hands, or in the words of Bruce Springsteen, like I’ve “got debts no honest man can pay.” Yet, shame over white wealth privilege only makes us do less. For what helps, let’s circle back to Ninevah – confession, repentance and restoration. For what help’s let’s circle back to Matthew 25: not forgetting, overcoming fear of taking a risk, praying as if our lives depend on it to see what is undone, what we are missing, and then doing something next. Like our church has been working on together in all the Matthew 25 initiatives.

The verb the goats use in verse 44 is worth nothing, “when was it that we saw you hungry/thirsty/stranger/naked/sick/in prison and did not take care of you?” The Greek translated “care” is a form of “diaconae” – a word which means to serve and by which we get our word Deacon. This will be a new line: the antidote to being a goat? Deacon Board. If Jesus jumpstarts something in your heart from this passage, something about your or this church’s commitment to anti-racism, something about recalibrating life, reorienting to truth and returning to the way of Jesus, I bet it will involve being a servant. Not a begrudging obligation to share privilege, but with the joy Jesus takes in being one for those he loves. I bet it will involve seeing what has yet to be done, not in a posture from above, giving to people what you have but they don’t, but from below, with the love Jesus finds in

the giving of his life. Jesus is serious about his expectation for your life, because your life brings him joy and your love builds his kingdom. Jesus is serious about his expectation for our life together, because that too brings him joy, that love too builds his kingdom. This is how we see him, this is how he finds us, when we practice giving our lives away together. This is the website used for the housing documents:

<https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/#loc=5/39.1/-94.58>