

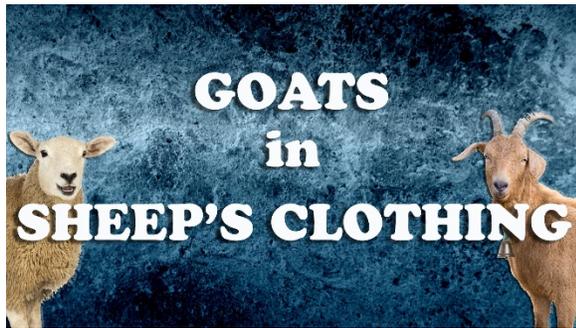
**Title:** Goats in Sheep's Clothing

**Preaching:** Randy Spleth, Senior Minister

**Scripture:** [Ephesians 4:32-5:2](#)

**Text:** [Matthew 25:31-46](#)

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Here we are on the Sunday after a historic election, a week after we picked sides. I'm sure you've picked a side and so I'm going to talk about your side. But the side I'm talking about is not represented by donkeys and elephants, rather, goats and sheep. Which are you? If I made you choose, which one would you be? A goat or a sheep?

You think, "Randy, I don't want to be a goat or a sheep but since this is worship and since Jesus said 'I am the good shepherd', mark me down as a sheep." Be careful now. In the first century, both pastured together in one herd. The shepherd looked after sheep and goats which is a challenge because goats are curious and wander off while sheep aren't too sharp and hang together. Given this, will you stay as with sheep? "Yes because Jesus said, "I know my sheep and my sheep know me..." (John 10:14) That's reasonable of you and it is of course true. Jesus does know his sheep but he also knows his goats. He points this out, in his final parable, one of six offered, according to Matthew, days before he died on a cross.

It's important to place this in context because last Sunday, we took a break from studying these parables to give attention to All Saints Day. Now, we return to finish the series. If you want to review, go to the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter of Matthew when Jesus began this storytelling blitz. The first three parables were told to the scribes and Pharisees, directed to the religious authorities. The final three, including today's final story, is offered to his followers, people like you and me. Even though they have been interpreted over the centuries as stories about the end, they are also about how to live. That's important to keep in mind as we listen to Jesus tell his final parable, called the "The Judgement of the Nations" although no one believes Jesus titled any of his parables. That's our title from tradition.

Jesus tells it somewhere outside of the Temple. Perhaps under a grove of olives, Jesus stops and begins to tell a story. Sometime in the future, he offers, all of the nations will gather before the Son of Man in all the colors of

the rainbow. It will be like a playing field for sports where everyone will be divided into two teams. The good team on the right will be called the Sheep, and the bad team on the left will be called the Goats. The captain choosing these teams is the Son of Man, but everyone knows that Jesus is the captain, the captain of our souls. <sup>1</sup>

People are selected not based on their athletic ability, or their earthly success, or even something as the correctness of their beliefs. They will be selected on one thing, kindness. Everyone wants to be on the sheep team because the Son of Man says to them, "Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." (Matthew 25:36)

These acts were not one act occurrences or occasional events. They point toward a disposition or attitude towards life, repeated if not unconscious acts of compassion and mercy. Jesus then says to the unrighteous goats, "Depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." (Matthew 25:43)

Both groups are amazed and respond identically, "Lord, when? WHEN? When was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison?" And to both he says, "Truly I tell you, just as you did [or did not do] it to one of the least of these, you did [or did not do] it to me." (Matthew 25:41,45) If indeed this story is about living as much as dying, then judgment day happens not only at the end of time but on every occasion when we refuse to acknowledge Christ in a neighbor.

Please note that there is no court of appeal because this is the court of appeal, the last court, the supreme court, the supreme, supreme court of justice. There are no degrees of guilt: sheep right; goats left. At least that is how Jesus' words have been understood. Now you know why I'm on to this sheep and goats kick.

I wonder if it encouraged the disciples as much as it encourages us. In an unjust world, justice will finally, in the end, take place. There will be a reckoning. Terrorists and rapists, murderers and racists, liars and philanders, cheats and angry property damaging protestors, and of course, those despicable politicians and their terrible catalog of deeds which we

know by heart! In the end, there will be justice. In the end, the account comes due; time to pay up.

We can, with this parable, know with great confidence, there is a great judgment checkout counter. Every sin has a price. Every deed will be scanned. All of *you* terrible awful people, who have lived such sinful lives. You thought you could bank your good deeds, did you? Ha! You won't be able to pay the price. You don't have a wallet fat enough. You don't have enough frequent flyer points on your charge cards. You don't have enough rich relatives or enough property to mortgage. You don't have friends upstairs to help you out, and you won't be able to pay the price. It is sweet news for the sheep and terrible news for the goats. Justice will be done. God's will will be accomplished. Let the sheep say, "Hallelujah." Let the people say, "All right. Amen!"

Before any of us get too excited at the sweet prospect of others getting their due, let me point out that we will all stand before God's judgment at that big checkout counter in the sky. There is only one line. There isn't a separate express lane for those with 13 sins or less; no friendly cashiers who will ignore the odd sin here or there; and no special queue for terrorists, murderers, thieves, and rapists. We will all be in the same line. We will all be looking around at each other's shopping baskets to see what is in there. You have that? You did that? You said that?

We may not have done something criminal, but I know that when my sins are scanned, truth be told, I will not be able to pay the price. I hope I've been good, but I know that I have willingly passed by folks standing on the street corner holding up those cardboard signs, people who need water, food, or shelter. And it did not even occur to me that it was Jesus standing on that corner. I drive by the Marion County jail downtown, I never pull in, park, and visit Christ behind the bars. And while I've always appreciated making hospital calls, in these pandemic days, I can't.... and I will admit there is a part of me that says that is okay. It may be the Lord in those beds but you know there is a virus. Given all of this, by definition, this story Jesus tells me I am a goat. We are all goats.

Here is the problem: if every sin has a price when the check-out register on judgment day tallies what we owe, none of us will be able to pay up. If all of the nations are divided into sheep and goats, the teams are not going to be even. There will be a multitude of goats on the goat side, and over on the sheep side, there will be one lone sheep. There will be only one who is innocent, not many, just one. And that one will be Jesus Christ, the only one who is truly a sheep, the Lamb of God. One sheep and many goats.

As a goat, I figure that Jesus already knew the composition of the teams when he told this parable. Why? Because he was the Good Shepherd and knows his sheep and his goats. And since this parable is his last, as soon as he finishes telling it he turns to his disciples and announces that the Son of Man will be crucified within the week (Matt 26:1-2). In other words, he is going to the cross to die. But he is not just going to the cross to die, he is going to die for the goats. Jesus came to save the sinners. He died for the goats. He died to save the goats. He rose again to sit at the right hand of God on behalf of the goats. He is God's judge. He is God's judgment. He is God's payment for our sins. He is the one who pays for us when we come up short at the checkout counter.

Jesus knows us, sees us at the eternal check-out counter, sees us because he is the good shepherd, and knows his sheep and goats. He comes over to us as we are vainly patting our pockets and purging our purses looking for the means to pay, and Jesus says, "I see you are a goat. Goat, I love you. I love you. Let me pray for you. I desire mercy, not sacrifice. Won't you let me offer you my cloak that you might share in my innocence and glory?" And to all of us who want to follow his ways he drapes over our shoulders his sheep's cloak that we might not only look like sheep but be counted as sheep by God. We are goats in sheep's clothing. One hundred percent pure Lamb's wool.

I guess the question isn't whether or not you are a goat or a sheep. We know the answer, which side you've picked. You are a goat. I'm a goat. The question should have been, are you willing, the goat that you are, to wear sheep's clothing now, in advance of that which will be draped on you by the Good Shepherd upon entering the kingdom. If the answer is yes, then I challenge you to attempt to meet the criteria for selection. Be kind. It is the sole criterion of the Judgment of Nations. Kindness. Compassion. And let's face it, kindness and compassion are so out of fashion that, when an example is seen, it is shocking. Meanness, incivility, and lack of charity is the rule of the day. But to wear sheep clothing, you need to be kind. Or as Paul challenges us: "...be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." (Ephesian 4:32-5:2)

It's just a thought if this parable is about living as well as dying. Be kind. Be generous. Be compassionate and forgiving, not to become a sheep. By God's grace, you get that. Rather, be kind because as a goat, it's the way to wear sheep's clothing.

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<sup>1</sup> Wilson, P. S. (2004). A goat's perspective: Matthew 25:31-46. *Ex Auditu*, 20, 162–165. The core of the sermon is a reworking of this article.