

Christ the King Sunday  
Year A

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(1) Sheep, (2) Goats, (3) the Least of These ... so there are three distinct groups of characters in this story.

The Sheep – who are generous and kind to the least, the last and the lost

The Goats – who are just not

And those in need – Christ calls them “the least of these” and “my family.”

Three distinct groups, right?

Sheep and Goats and The Least of These.

And we all read this gospel every time and think,

“Man, oh, man, do I hope I am a sheep.

I am trying to do sheep behaviors, I am trying be like a sheep...

I hope I am a sheep and not a goat....”

Here is a pro – tip about the Gospel. If it appears to support distinct groups, hierarchies, “the select” or “us” versus “them” concepts.... Then it’s not the Gospel.

The good news is, You ARE a Sheep.

You are also a Goat.

And you are also The Least of These.

And yes, it’s all Good News.

Let’s look at this text, not with the literal eyes of people who are not trying very hard to understand. Let’s look with the imaginative eyes of a savior who told stories to teach about the kingdom of our salvation.

*“I was hungry and you gave me food,”*

Could that mean more than helping with our PADS guests? Could that mean engaging in real, deep, authentic conversation with someone who feels unheard?

*“I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink,”*

Could this be a time when someone craved affirmation, approval, a kind word?

*“I was a stranger and you welcomed me,”*

Could this be as simple as saying “bienvenidos” – welcome - even if that is the only Spanish word you know.

*“I was naked, and you gave me clothing”*

Could this be a time that someone felt or was vulnerable and you stepped up to defend or protect them, even with just a gesture?

*“I was sick, and you took care of me”*

Could this be just not judging when a colleague misses three days of work for a cold this past week?

*“I was in prison and you visited me.”*

Well, there are many kinds of prisons, my friends, some of our own making. Perhaps we are called just being present as we are able to one another in our own personal incarcerations....

There are many ways to be a sheep. And when we do these blessed and sheep like behaviors, we get a glimpse of the mystery of God, of the limitlessness of grace.... Of eternal life.

We are all sheep. But we are all goats as well.

When we turn away from someone who asks for help because we suspect their motives.

When we are afraid of what will be asked of us... That it may cost us more than we are willing to give. That it might force us to confront things we don't want to deal with.

When we cannot unbend and forgive and be in relationship, even with the irritating sister-in-law.

When we just don't have the bandwidth to help someone else because we are exhausted.

When we act like goats, our consciences often get to us, we feel awful. It's a kind of personal punishment that seems never to end.

We are all sometimes sheep and sometimes goats. And we experience a glimpse of eternal life, and what feels like eternal punishment.

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And we are also the least of these. We should never be seduced into thinking these people, whom Jesus calls “his family” are “other.” We should never let ourselves think of this group of people as “them.”

We are all sheep, we are all goats, we are all the least, the last and the lost of God's creation.

When have you been hungry and needed someone to offer you sustenance?

Was it food that you needed? Or just someone to care? Was it hunger that you felt, or fear?

When have you thirsted for something out of your reach?

Was it a return to health? Was it the repair of a relationship?

When have you been a stranger and needed to be welcomed?

Was it in a 12 Step Program? Or a middle school lunch room?

When have you been vulnerable, exposed, and were offered your dignity?

I am the mother of two 15-year-old girls. I am made vulnerable by age appropriate cruelty four or five times every morning before I get out the door to work. But I go, knowing that my colleagues will clothe me in dignity and respect.

When have you let someone care for you when you were sick?

This is a challenging one for us – there is a whole sermon in letting people minister to us and the evils of self-reliance. But that is for another day.

When have you been held prisoner by something – your pride, your ego, words spoken in anger or ignorance, and yet you found yourself strangely not entirely alone?

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We have all been the Least of These.

We have all been Goats.

We have all been Sheep.

We are all the characters in this story and that is not uncommon in the Gospel.

It is a worthwhile practice to take a look at the Gospel as you read it every week and ask yourself not “which character am I in this Gospel” but “how am I each character.”

This gospel reminds us that the love of God in Christ is not a top-down affair.

It is a shared ministry among equals.

And not just equals, but people all made in the image of God, sharing in that “thumbprint of divinity” that unites us in a way we can’t understand.

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Next week we will begin the season of Advent in which we anticipate the coming of the Messiah.

Jesus Christ comes into our world entirely human and entirely God.

Jesus is all the characters.

That is what is required to bring in the kingdom.

That is what is required to heal what is broken in creation and bring us into relationship with one another and God.

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I will leave you with a story told to me years ago by my friend Charles LaFond.

A group of missionary tourist adventurers from a very protestant church of some kind who went for a week to Calcutta India

to “help” the Sisters of Charity, Mother Theresa’s group of sisters who take the dying from the streets of Calcutta to clean them and hold them as they die.

Their hospital is for the dying and they help more than 200 people die every day. Most are Hindus or atheists.

Many are prostitutes dying of AIDS and drug addicts and many others are dying of starvation or dysentery.

After the third day of work in the clinic, the head of the American group demanded to speak to the head nun of the unit.

She said she was too busy, but they persisted every hour until she came to them.

he group of 10 Americans said, “We came here to save these people from hell fire.

We came to spread the gospel of Christ.

We came to tell people in India that they do not have to die and go to hell.

They can die in Jesus and be saved!

But you! You have us working so hard scraping maggots off them and bandaging them and washing them that we have no time to minister to them.

And you have given us no translators. Our letter said we needed translators.

The nun stood and said "It is true what you say.

You are spending your time holding these poor ones, cleaning wounds and wiping their faces with a cool cloth as they die.

There is no time for more.

But then they awaken - in the arms of Jesus, and as they look into that face they will say,

"You! I know you. I recognize you.. You were the one who was just wiping my face with a cool, clean cloth!"

Amen.