### “You Gave Me Food” Steve Finlan for The First Church, November 26, 2023

**Ezekiel 34:15–23**

15I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. 16I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice. 20 Therefore, thus says the Lord God to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. 21Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, 22I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep.

23 I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd.

**Matthew 25:31–40**

31“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. . . 32And he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. . . 34Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 35for 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, 36I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ 37Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? 38When was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ 40And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’”

I hope you all had a good Thanksgiving. We should, really, wake up amazed every morning at the blessings we have in our lives, and give thanks continually.

Looking at our Scriptures, we see that believers can be compared to sheep. In the Ancient Near East, populations were often pictured as sheep, and their kings as shepherds. This carries over into biblical usage, although it moves away from strictly nationalistic boundaries. In the New Testament, it is the believer community that can be imaged as sheep. Now, calling someone a sheep can sometimes be an insult, but that is not the case in this metaphor. Sheep are known to follow the lead of the shepherd, or of a sheepdog. So a sheep is simply a follower. In this particular Matthew passage, sheep are the good people and goats (who in real life are rambunctious and hard to control) are bad people. Sheep and wild animals appear in a judgment scene in *First Enoch* (*1 En* 89:28–76), a very important book in Jesus’ time that did not make it into the Bible but which is quoted by the biblical author, Jude (Jude 14–16).

Jesus uses the sheep and goats metaphor, and then dispenses with it, having God speak to people, and the people respond back. The emphasis in Jesus’ saying here is on *doing*, not on believing or feeling, but on actions taken in connection with other people. How we treat other people is supremely important. We find this stressed by the Old Testament prophets, by the New Testament letters of James and Jude, and the Gospel of Matthew. In Matthew, Jesus is always emphasizing acting with charity toward the needy. Here he speaks of those who were hungry or unclothed or sick or who were in prison, “and you gave me food . . . you gave me clothing . . . you took care of me . . .you visited me” (25:35–36). One’s loyalty to Jesus is proven by one’s acts of mercy toward “the least of these” (25:40), or disproven by one’s *failure* to act mercifully (25:45). The key question is “did you take care of others?” Did the plight of suffering people break through the pillars around your heart and get through to you? Did you take action of some kind? There’s more than one way to take action on this front.

Today’s Ezekiel passage also has an emphasis on morality. Someone in a leadership role has been shoving and injuring the weaker sheep, “you . . . butted at all the weak animals with your horns” (34:21), prompting God to say “I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep” (34:22). God as a shepherd means God is a protector and guide. Ezekiel is telling the Jewish community that their leaders have not been good to them, but God will provide a good leader, “my servant David” (34:25).

Both of our passages urge compassion for vulnerable or needy people, people who are pushed around, or “ravaged,” who are hungry, or even who are in prison. We need to minister to those people, for they are Jesus’ children, and inasmuch as we do it for them, we are doing it for him.

Again I say, notice how there is nothing there about what you are supposed to believe or how you are supposed to worship. This is strictly about how you are supposed to minister to those who are suffering and in need. From at least as early as the second century, Christians were known for their compassion for the needy, founding care centers for the sick, and in recent centuries, founding many hospitals.

Our Missions Committee contributes to many worthy causes. For several years, we have given to the Christmas Fund, which augments the income of retired or underpaid clergy and church workers, including music directors. I hope to hear about this year’s drive soon.

But the real drive comes from each one of us, individually, when we are motivated to do good to others, out of gratitude for what God has done for us. It is your kindness that drives the whole church. “Freely you have received; freely give” (Matt 10:8 NIV), as Jesus said to his apostles. If we have experienced God’s love, then we burn with the desire to pass it on. We act out of gratitude. How could we receive so much and not want to give it out? As the author of Ephesians wrote, “give thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ ” (Eph 5:20).

As followers of Jesus, there will be times when we feel like holding back and being a good listener, and other times when we will feel empowered to take leadership. But we can’t avoid the fact that we represent Christ here on earth. We are called to love. Maybe we’re really more like puppy dogs than sheep: loving but clever.

Next Sunday begins the Advent season, where we anticipate the birth of Jesus, the Incarnation of the Word in human flesh. That is *really* something for which we can be grateful.