

That'll Get Your Goat!
The Monroe Congregational Church
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
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Matthew 25:31-46

It's big business on the West Coast to install high-end sound systems in the homes of the rich and famous. Former Presidents, owners of sports teams, Hollywood celebrities, corporate CEOs... these are real VIP's, and the sound systems they purchase can easily run into the millions of dollars. If you are a salesperson for a high end sound system company, you are expected to meet a certain sales threshold; the pressure is extreme.

As you might imagine, the competition is intense among the small number of companies who provide this kind of service; sometimes, their tactics get rather down-and-dirty. The companies are known for spying on each other, and they constantly try to get the upper hand.

To get these high-end contracts requires a lot of marketing, referrals, and wining and dining, so the companies put on lavish parties several times a year to thank their customers and referrals, to introduce their new concepts and designs, and to network with service providers.

Last year the sales team of one retailer designed a weekend VIP event in Las Vegas, Nevada. A six figure budget was set aside to entertain many of the company's important clients. Three hundred of the finest hotel rooms were rented and paid for, a private performance from a famous entertainer was arranged.

Gourmet food and drink was ordered for the kick-off: an exclusive brunch on the first morning of the event. There would be fresh seafood, made-to-order omelets, organic fruit, pastries, lox and bagels, French champagne, and a chocolate fondue tower. No expense would be spared.

Security for this event was very tight, only 450 tickets were printed. Event planners went into action, mailing out invitations, flight vouchers, and tickets for the meals and shows.

But something went terribly wrong, and about half of the tickets for the opening event never made it to the mail. Instead, they were stolen by an intern and sold to a rival company that had plans to ruin the

event. I'm sure that made for a very uncomfortable moment for those who had worked so hard at planning the party! ****

The scripture passage today may have left some of us feeling a little uncomfortable too.

I'm a country girl... to a point. When I was younger I spent quite a bit of time at my friend Heather's farm. Heather taught me how to milk a cow, gather eggs from a chicken coop, and muck a horse stall. I can ride, and even took lessons on both an English saddle and a Western saddle as a child. But let's face it, that and my one cowboy hat hardly qualifies me as an expert on farm animals.

So I had to investigate a little to better understand why Jesus uses sheep and goats for his analogy. In Palestine during that time, the shepherds routinely kept mixed herds of animals – sheep and goats all together. It was difficult to tell them apart from a distance, you had to get really close to notice which was which (goats tail stick up, sheep tails hang down).

At night, shepherds separated their flocks. The goats needed more protection from the cold, so they were kept inside roughshod stables. The sheep were better suited for the night air, and were sent out to enjoy the pasture under the careful watch of the sheepdogs.

Bottom line... sheep held more commercial value than goats. Now the analogy begins to make a little bit more sense. In our parable today, the sheep, those who held the greater value to the Shepherd, were invited to the right side, which, in Jewish tradition, was the place of honor. Those who were also in the Shepherd's care, but who had made themselves less valuable in the kingdom of heaven, still were invited to his side, but in a place of lesser honor, on the left.

Remember the Beatitudes, those beautiful statements of justice from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount which we studied back in January? When he spoke about the kingdom of heaven, he was referring to that state of grace that comes when a person knows the love of God in his or her heart, and out of that love is compelled to live righteously and help others do the same.

Now at the end of Jesus' ministry, we pivot towards Holy Week and he tries to impress upon his followers one last time the whole point of what he has been saying all along: the ones who hear God's call to engage in works of mercy in their world: feeding the hungry, providing

water to the thirsty, shelter to the stranger, clothing the naked, and caring for the sick and visiting those who are in prison are blessed. He verbalizes again what they already knew deep down in their bones: their goodness has made them feel good, which has brought them closer to God and the kingdom of heaven.

It's not unlike what we discover in our life of faith. When you confer a blessing on the community, you feel blessed – and you ARE blessed. You are a part of a larger project, a bolder mission, a healing message of love and hope. You have found the way to thrive as the Body of Christ, and as a result: more missions are supported, more people are welcomed, more children are taught the love of God, the call of Jesus, and the heartbeat within them of the Holy Spirit.

Those who do not feel the internal call of God to be in relationship, to care for their neighbor, are ultimately deprived from the experience of the kingdom of heaven, pushing God away and out of their lives. And maybe that is a lonely place to be.

Remember the context of Matthew's Gospel. These words were written down during the late 1st century after the Jesus movement had lost steam. Matthew was fervently trying, by any means necessary, to bring his community back in line with his Messianic theology. We might hear these words and toss them away as too archaic or strange. They might suggest to us the possibility of a future judgment day, and maybe that's important to us. It would be nice to know how we are doing, to get a clear scorecard.

For me (and I qualify this statement as my own good news), I would rather concentrate on how I live my life right here and right now... today ... in this setting, as your pastor, as Clarks' spouse, as a mother, a friend, and as a world citizen.

There's an urgency to tending for those around us, and the correct measurement for me to be judged upon is not just how I am doing but how my neighbor is doing. The mistakes I made just yesterday which turn me into a goat, I renounce and repent as of today. Today, I choose to try to live as the sheep, and I believe that Jesus welcomes me to that resolution, just as he welcomes you when you set aside your goat-ness, and embrace your sheep-ness. ****

You know that lavish breakfast I told you about a few minutes ago? Well, here's what I was told about how it all went down.

The sponsoring company had everything ready for their invited guests, but the RSVPs were slow in coming. At 9 am, the doors opened to the venue. A man appeared who was not on the guest list, although he held a ticket in his hand. He smelled of the streets and of cheap wine; his clothes were tattered, he carried a backpack stuffed with all his worldly belongings. The few teeth he still had were yellow, but his smile was ear to ear as he proudly held out his ticket to the event. And in he walked.

Pretty soon another street person arrived at the doorway, this one a woman who was disoriented, disheveled, speaking to an imaginary person next to her. And she, too had a ticket. All morning, more and more homeless persons arrived for the breakfast, all holding valid tickets.

It turns out the rival company had sabotaged the event by taking those stolen tickets and handing them out on the streets of Las Vegas, telling the homeless that the breakfast was being hosted in their honor, and they would be treated as kings and queens to an endless breakfast buffet.

But it backfired. At first, the greeters didn't know what to do, as more than 150 street people lined up for the free meal. That was when the hostess of the event and some of the intended guests got up from their seats, went to the door, and personally ushered the people standing in line to seats at their tables. All were treated to a wonderful meal, an exchange of fascinating stories, and the chance to make new and unexpected friends.

The party was so successful that the event planners decided to make it an annual event, and next year, the hosts will be prepared to give their guests new clothing, medical supplies, non-perishable food to go, and meal vouchers.

The sheep were those who welcomed the "least of them" and who gave them the honored seat at the table. The goats were the ones who intended to ruin the occasion for their rival company, and they were denied a sacred experience of God.

As we move slowly toward Holy Week, the tragic irony is that all of these things... hunger, thirst, imprisonment and the rest, will become part of the path that Jesus walked on his way to the cross. In our times, we can choose to notice Christ in those who suffer or we can choose to look away. Amen.