

“We Are the Sheep of His Hand”

“For...we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand” (Psalm 95:7).

Today’s Gospel reading has always been one of great interest and importance for the Church. It has inspired works of charity and sparked social ministry, and it is also a text that has been used to evoke fear and foster guilt. Like the two-minute warning in a close football game, this reading presents us with an unmistakable reminder that the clock is running and the end is near, and although Jesus speaks to us in the form of a parable, His words leave little doubt that the picture He is describing is one of finality and judgment: “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats” (Matthew 25:31-32).

In these words, Jesus tells us that He is coming back, and this time when He comes it will not be in the secret silence of a dark Bethlehem stable or the hidden humility of a straw-covered manger, but it will be in His raw and perfect power as the creator of the universe. This time when He comes, His majesty will be uncovered and His authority as our Judge will be on full display.

This harrowing reading points us straight to Judgment Day when the great Shepherd will separate the sheep from the goats, and, on some level, Jesus’ words force us to ask, “Which one am I?” And when we confront this ultimate question, what we find is terrifying because when we look at our lives hoping to find the actions of “sheep” who feed the hungry and clothe the naked; who call on the sick and visit the imprisoned, what we find are the times when we’ve turned our backs on the hungry; when we’ve hoarded God’s blessings to us; when we’ve run from the uncomfortable reality of the needs around us, and when we have gladly filled our stomachs and quenched our thirst while those right beside us have struggled to make it through the day.

This is a tough parable for us because its urgent tone forces us to face the truth about ourselves, and when we do, we look a lot more like guilty goats than saved sheep. In the light of the last day, we suddenly see the sins we’ve done such a good job of hiding from others. And we see our failures to follow through on the promises we’ve made to our families, or the commitments we’ve made to the Church. And we see our lack of compassion, and our failure to trust in God’s promises and to grow in our faith and, as we take an honest look at our lives, we find a desperate situation that offers no sign of hope.

But my friends in Christ, that’s not what the Shepherd sees! In the eyes of the Shepherd we are a “treasured possession.” In the eyes of the Shepherd, we are loved. In the eyes of the Shepherd we are forgiven. And in the eyes of the Shepherd, we are righteous. When compared with what we know about ourselves, the Shepherd’s vision of us seems impossible, and yet this is exactly what Scripture says about who we are in Christ.

In today’s Old Testament reading, God promises, “As a shepherd seeks out his scattered flock...so will I seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness...I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep and make them lie down...I will seek the lost and I will bring back the strayed. 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 in justice” (Ezekiel 34:12-16).

One of the most important things to understand about today's reading from Matthew 25 is that the sheep in the parable are sheep before they are separated from the goats. The sheep are not mysteriously turned into sheep and then divided out from the goats. The sheep are sheep already, made that way by their creator. In this parable, our sheep status is not gained or earned, it is given, and the application for us is clear: Our salvation is totally God's work! The challenge of this text is to help us see through the eyes of the Shepherd; to help us live our lives as forgiven sinners, and to assure us that through the blood of the Good Shepherd, "we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand" (Psalm 95:7).

In this parable, the King says "to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.'" (Matthew 25:34). Did you hear that? From the foundation of the world; from before time began; in God's eternal and sovereign plan, you were chosen in Christ for the Kingdom! You were chosen in Christ to receive an inheritance! You were given, in Christ—before you took a breath on this earth—the forgiveness of sins and the righteousness of God; and because of God's choice, made on the Cross and given to us in our baptism, you are a redeemed subject of the King, a sheep of His pasture, a child of the Heavenly Father, and an heir of eternal life.

God has not prepared you for Hell. Instead, in Christ, He endured Hell on the Cross so that you could be forgiven, so that you could be saved, so that you could look ahead to His second coming not with guilt and fear, but with peace and trust that our Shepherd will not lose even one of His sheep. As Jesus reminds us, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:27-28).

This text encourages us to live as sheep who have been saved by the Shepherd, who trust in Him and will not be misled. Here, Jesus challenges us to consider, in light of His love and forgiveness, just what sort of people we are. That challenge colors Jesus' picture of the second coming, and it forces us to consider, "How do we live while we are waiting for Him to return?" And the answer to this question is found in who you are.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, you are the sheep of His hand, and because this is who you are, you can live out your life each day as one who feeds the hungry and gives drink to those who thirst; as one who calls on the sick and visits those in prison...but not only that. Because this is who you are, you can keep your commitments to your kids; you can submit to your spouse out of reverence for Christ; you can show love to a co-worker who has shown you hate; you can reconcile with a family member who has hurt you deeply; you can confront and forgive the sin of a brother or sister who has fallen; and you can serve, love, and care for even the least of these.

"When did we do those things?" My favorite part of this reading is the response of the sheep to the welcoming words of the King, because you see, Christians don't dwell on what they've done. The Christian's whole existence is a life of faith showing itself through love purely as a response to what God has already accomplished for us. This is what it means to be sheep. Our identity is a done deal. Our future in heaven is a sure thing. And now, as God's chosen people, we can live our lives in a way that makes a difference in the world. Remember that you are the people of His pasture and the sheep of His hand...and go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today. Amen.

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