



## Goats, Sheep and All Types of Creatures

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Joseph Schaller*

*Sixth Sunday of Creation Season: Justice~ November 12, 2017*

Micah 6:1-4, 6-8

Hear what the LORD says: Arise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the LORD, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the LORD has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel. "O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of bondage; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. "With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my first-born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

An excerpt from a speech by Archbishop Oscar Romero

The transcendence that the church preaches is not alienation; it is not going to heaven to think about eternal life and forget about the problems on earth. It's a transcendence from the human heart. It is entering into the reality of a child, of the poor, of those wearing rags, of the sick, of a hovel, of a shack. It is going to share with them. And from the very heart of misery, of this situation, to transcend it, to elevate it, to promote it, and to say to them, "You aren't trash. You aren't marginalized." It is to say exactly the opposite, "You are valuable."

Matthew 25:31-46

"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. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then 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; 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.' Then 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? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And 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, [g] you did it to me.' Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, 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.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

It seems to me that we've had a lot of goats showing up in the news lately. But before I go any further, I'd like to speak to the fact that goats have been routinely maligned in scripture and other places, and are probably getting a bad rap. Now, I'm no expert on small domestic livestock, and I will admit that sheep seem much more cuddly than goats. But sheep don't appear to be the most intelligent or assertive of God's creatures. They tend to prefer remaining in herds, which makes them good examples to church congregations and all who approve of peaceable cooperation. We all know how much trouble the singular "lost sheep" who wanders off can be. Meanwhile, goats are notoriously independent. They seem to be able to survive in rather hostile environments, as I learned several years ago while hiking through a rugged terrain on a Greek Island, encountering the occasional goat perched precariously on a pile of rocks munching on a very unpromising piece of scrub brush. So, you don't have to like goats, but let's not allow them to be defamed.

Of course, the Jesus of Matthew's Gospel is not intending to deliver a treatise on the merits of sheep vs. goats, except to use them as familiar exemplars probing a larger point. His discourse is in the vein found throughout both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures providing a clear choice and dividing humanity into two types of persons: those who choose life vs. death as in Deuteronomy; those who believe in Jesus and are saved and those who refuse to believe; and those who are deemed worthy at the last judgement and those who are damned. But the most important point of today's Gospel is the explicit description of what one needs to do to merit salvation. Echoing the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus makes clear that those who give food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, cloth the naked and visit the sick and imprisoned stranger are, in fact, ministering to Christ and as Christ. At the same time, those who fail to do it to the least of one's brothers or sisters will be condemned. So don't say you weren't warned. While we might all easily get on board with this prescription for salvation, we also can't avoid the inconvenient message that assures us that we will all be judged, maybe less by what is in our hearts than by what we have actually done in our response to others. And, keeping in mind the selection from Micah today, we can also reasonably conclude that when the Son of Man returns, he is going to be really pissed.

I certainly am more comfortable with dwelling on the experience of God as all loving and infinitely patient and forgiving, and I do believe that these characteristics are of the essence of the Holy Mystery we call God. But perhaps we shouldn't be too quick to let go of the awareness of God who is also characterized by what we might call moral outrage. This is not a God who demands supplication as if we are feeding the ego of an unrestrained narcissist, or a god who sends indiscriminate punishment in the form of earthquakes, fire and flood. But it certainly reveals a God who is not at all indifferent to how we behave ourselves with regard to other people, and not just the ones in our orbit of preferred relationships.

This seems to be an amazingly simple criteria for salvation while at the same time being maddening impossible to fulfill. It doesn't take a lot to give to others most in need, yet the more we do it, the more that we become aware that so much more needs to be done. We can quickly bump up against our own limitations in being as generous as we would like, and our tendencies to overlook what we actually can do. We then have to contend with the fact that we are human, and will at times legitimately assert some degree of self-interested behavior to preserve our well-being. So returning to the sheep/goats metaphor for a moment, it might be true to say that we are all somewhat of a blend of the two. And that's not bad! Perhaps we need to be a little goat-like at times to be independent, assertive and to survive rough situations. And our steepness allows us to seek participation in community in a way that protects and sustains us. I'd like to extend this ethic of responsibility to all who are made to feel like "the least of these" beyond the categories mentioned by Jesus—to all who feel manipulated and disavowed by those with power and privilege. Fortunately or not, politics and the media provide an endless supply of examples of really bad behavior which may help us to feel somewhat relieved about our own paltry shortcomings. I may not be a saint, but at least I'm not like Harvey Weinstein! Being polite and responsible people, we might well wish that we and our children were not being inundated by so much graphic material pointing to both boorish and criminal behavior. Yet far from being a sign of society's moral decay brought about by increasingly liberal sexual mores and "political correctness," I see this increased exposure as an advance in our ethical sensibilities and maybe even a rise in a willingness to be responsible as a society. Still, it's clear that there are a lot of folks around who still don't quite get it!

Sexual ethics are primarily about justice and right-relationship. We shouldn't wait for the final judgment to call out the goats, sheep or whatever else is lurking out there. Yet some people cling to the belief that everything was fine until we started paying attention to the voices of those who felt betrayed by the hypocrisy of certain "traditional" attitudes. As an example, I'm thinking about remarks made recently by John Kelly, Chief-of-Staff at the White House. He was waxing nostalgically about a time in this nation when women were treated with dignity and respect. When was this time exactly? The days of cozy television sit-coms like "The Donna Reed Show," Leave

it to Beaver” and “Father Knows Best?” Or days before that when women were not allowed to vote in this country? Of when women earned substantially less for doing the same work as men (which still continues!)? Of when any woman entering the “male” world of certain jobs and professions has to be prepared for any number of unwanted sexual advances as part of the ticket of admission? Or when women had no safe or legal means to manage their reproductive health and decisions, nor even the opportunity to discuss options openly? I might also call to mind the journey of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender individuals who continue to experience discrimination and even physical danger in many quarters. And then, of course, there’s the situation of children who have so often been exploited by those in position of authority and power. It’s a sad litany which could easily be extended to other groups according to skin color, religion and ethnicity. All of these things may be summed up as related to assumption of gendered and privileged prerogatives and prejudice—which is essentially judgment without understanding or compassion—and the attitude which holds that some people can be used by others solely for their gratification and convenience.

Moral theologians sometimes describe persons in terms of their fundamental moral orientation, the accumulation of our attitudes, habits and behaviors. Good people sometimes do not-so-good things, and even well intentioned actions can have unintended consequences that ripple far beyond ourselves. So while behaving ourselves is a very good place to start, attitude and the disposition of our heart can also make a very big difference.

Oscar Romero was a Roman Catholic Archbishop who was gunned down in his own cathedral in El Salvador by government forces opposed to his preaching and advocacy on behalf of the poor. I appreciate his reminder that growth in Christian identity requires what he called the transcendence of the human heart, a kind of expansion of our capacity to not merely give to the sick, poor and imprisoned, but to enter into the reality of their own lives. That beyond providing for the physical needs of others, we are actually recognizing them as sisters and brothers. This recognition is not about a donation from our sense of privilege—though privileged we may be. It is also about taking our place within the herd of humanity, all participants in a world of grace.

Transcendence is not a once-and-for-all proposition, much less a maneuver meant to position us to live happily-ever-after. I’ve often thought that if we view our adherence to our beliefs merely as a means of getting to seven then we missed the point. It’s really about getting into life! And into a life which is fully in God. Transcendence is an ongoing surrender to God’s call to us. I think this is why we need the Church, when we need to gather regularly in praise and reflection to remember who we are and who we are always becoming. Gathering in community to hear the Word and receive at the Table allow us to be better than who we might be if left on our own. It’s also nice to realize we’re not in this whole project as isolated goats. Together we might encounter the God continues to meet the affront on the innocence of creation with the pull toward justice and love. This describes the calling of us all, a calling which we might embrace with tenderness, and joy, to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God.