

November 26, 2017
Last Sunday of the Church Year

“Being Sheep”

Matthew 25:31-46

“Develop your potential!” “Follow your passion!” “Make a future for yourself!” Such phrases occur a lot when elders are giving advice to young adults just starting out in life. I guess they make sense when it comes to making career choices. You want to find something you do well and have a passion for, and then do it in a successful manner that you might provide for yourself and a family in life. It just makes sense. You don’t want to just stagnate without a direction in life.

The daunting part of this for a lot of young people is that the onus is on you to identify your arena of passion and promise, and then make yourself prosperous there. And the fact is that many young people, maybe even most young people, don’t really have a clue where to start. They’re left kind of flailing around at college or in the workforce, desperately fearing being a loser and looking for a professional identity worth grasping for. Most of us older folks have been there, and ultimately found our way in life.

Unfortunately, many of us kind of live the whole experience over again when we hear Jesus tell the parable of the sheep and the goats. And it’s pretty stressful because Jesus isn’t at all unclear about what He is describing; it the Judgment with the Son of Man in glory with all the angels sitting at His glorious throne. This is serious business.

We hear what the sheep did. We hear what the goats didn’t do. And suddenly we’re looking around our lives wondering where we better be feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming strangers, clothing naked people and visiting the sick and imprisoned. We’re flailing about looking for direction and panicking that we’re the losers of not just life, but of eternity.

But here is where we get it wrong. As a young adult, we’re stepping out on our own, and we’re doing it for ourselves. We’re taking the reigns of control after being raised by our parents. Much of the stress comes from us finding ourselves in the driver’s seat without a whole lot of competence to drive, yet drive we must. The onus is on us to make something happen. But we make a mistake if we take this parable in the same vein.

This isn’t a parable about one becoming a sheep or one becoming a goat. It’s not a parable about goats becoming sheep, or sheep screwing up and changing into goats. The sheep are sheep from the get-go. The goats are goats from the beginning.

Why are the sheep sheep? Because they are; they don’t know why. They are sheep because Jesus says, “*Come, you who 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 drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.*”

The sheep don’t even know that they did all this. They have to ask, and Jesus, the King, answers, “*Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.*”

This simple truth of the parable is that the sheep are folks who simply were doing the love of God and love of neighbor thing not out of compulsion or fear of punishment, but because they knew their God—knew that they were created for God. Knowing they were under the love and blessing of this God, they just responded in love and blessing. They simply lived as members of the kingdom of God, as it was designed from the beginning.

And before we panic, let's remember that the sheep weren't doing this perfectly. Nobody can do it perfectly. That's why the Son of Man, Jesus Christ, had to come and die and rise to save us. But despite their worldly struggles and sin, the sheep are in the kingdom, in Christ. The sheep simply lived that reality which necessarily manifests itself in love of God and love of neighbor.

If I may stretch my analogy somewhat, the Christian life is somewhat like a person who grows up in the family business pretty much knowing that he or she is going into the family business. Such a person does and learns the things of the family business simply because it is the family business. In a manner of speaking, the child belongs to the family business.

Likewise, as St. Paul writes, "*Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.*"

You have been baptized into Christ and are made His sheep. By Grace through faith you belong to Christ. His purchase of humanity is your reality and you are here, living that, strengthening that, believing that. During the absolution of sins this happens. By the authority of the crucified and risen Savior you are declared to be sheep. In the Supper you receive the body and blood of your Shepherd that fortifies you as His sheep. Because you are His sheep, you leave here and live life...as His sheep. It's not a task you must accomplish. It's just what you do, going about your heavenly family business.

Now this doesn't mean that you can just sit back and be lazy and complacent about your faith and the living out of your love of God and love of neighbor. Just recently in our Gospel texts we've heard Jesus warn forcefully against such behavior in the parable of the wise and foolish virgins and the parable with those servants investing the talents. The prophets in the Old Testament are all about warning the Jews not to reject their birthright into the "family business" by chasing after false gods. Pretty much every epistle in the New Testament speaks to God's sheep, but exhorts the sheep to faithful practice and maturing in the Spirit. Stay awake! Be on guard! Watch yourself and work always to practice and improve your walk of faith!

But do not fear. Do not do this in a panic so that you might become God's sheep. Do this in the certainty that, by the power of Christ's sacrifice and resurrection, you this day are a sheep!

In this 500th anniversary year of the Reformation you may be kind of sick about hearing of Martin Luther so much, but what he did in large part was to straighten out this parable for the church.

The Roman Catholic church then, and they and many other denominations today, get this very wrong. In so many words they proclaim, "You're all goats! And you'd best be about trying harder and doing better or you'll still be a goat on judgment day!"

Um, no. Just no. The perfect Lamb who was slain now lives and reigns at the right hand of God. He did it all in our flesh and did it perfectly. He took all of your goat-ness to His cross and left it in His grave. He declares you righteous. On the day of His return He says, "*Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.*"

So have no fear, little flock. It is your Shepherd's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. You're in the family business. Your success is not up to you. It has already been made complete in Christ.

Simply go into your life knowing and trusting you are the beloved of a gracious God and live as His sheep which He has made you.

Amen.