

Sheep or Goat?

Text: Matthew 25:31-46

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on August 29, 2021

St. Peter was giving a tour of heaven to some new arrivals from Church A. As they approached one particular area, St. Peter said, "I need all of you to be really quiet through here." "Why?" someone asked. St. Peter answered, "That area is for Church B. They think they're the only ones here."

People both inside and outside Christianity get the St. Peter joke, because many of us have encountered the attitude of Church B. We're in and you're out; we're right, you're wrong; God loves us but not you; Heaven for us; and literally to hell with you. As we can see in our passage from Matthew 25, that concept is hardly new, nor is it unique to Christianity. There are no Christians in Matthew 25.

But before we look at the passage in more detail, I want to pull us out of our tendency to immediately think about whether we believe in a literal heaven or hell and think first about the way these ideas might actually be necessary. Voltaire famously said, "If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him." I think a similar argument can be made for the idea of heaven and hell, and I want you to have those ideas in your head before we look at the text itself.

Depending on the circumstances, the concepts of heaven and hell can provide either a hedge against despair or a weapon for oppression. Here at Crawford, I'm guessing I don't need to give examples of the latter. Many of us have directly experienced the hammer of churches or individuals proclaiming us bound for hell for any number of reasons, either as a tool for manipulation and control or to inflate their own self-worth and supremacy. But here on the more progressive side of the aisle, we don't often stop to think of the positive impact the ideas of heaven and hell can have.

The desire for justice is a human longing that isn't bounded by any religious ideology. For those who are oppressed; for those who are denied justice through our human systems again and again; for those who've had the justice systems of the dominant culture actually weaponized against them; the belief that everyone gets what they deserve in the next life can be the only thing that allows you to put one foot in front of the other each day.

To put it more bluntly, the more you see people literally getting away with murder, the more you really want that fire and brimstone hell. I have seen that in myself. I can and do argue against the traditional understanding of hell. That's where my mind is. But emotionally? Right now, I find myself thinking that Dante's nine levels of hell simply aren't enough. I want the infrastructure deal coming through Congress to include digging at least a tenth level if not more. For myself, if a literal hell does not exist, I would have to invent it. It expresses a degree of outrage and horror at the depth of human cruelty that nothing else quite covers.

And likewise with heaven. The thought of Heaven provides a necessary balm; an anchor of hope that there is a world where justice prevails. Hope that we will see a day, even if only in a life beyond death, where the hellishness of life on earth is banished and only the good remains. When the poor gather to sing about golden streets and mansions on a hilltop, that hope may be the only way to survive the week to come. And we surely need the hope that someone, somewhere is both noticing and will reward the real good that we do; because too frequently here that good is only punished or undone. Without that hope, it can be too easy to give up. Some believe that's a false hope. Maybe so.

But taking away even a false hope without meeting the need in another way is to do further harm and open the door to despair.

With all that in mind, let's consider the final judgment scene of Matthew 25, where I think Jesus uses the cultural trappings of reward and punishment in the afterlife to transform the understanding of both. Our reading on the sheep and goats ends the chapter. Chapter 26, shifts away from Jesus' teaching and toward the passion narrative describing the end of Jesus' life. If you look at the chapters before, you'll find that our passage is the culmination of a whole pile of warnings that begins in chapter 23. In fact, scholars call this whole section—from Matthew 23 through Matthew 25—The Judgment Discourse and see it as a bookend to the Sermon on the Mount back in chapters 5-7. In Matthew, the Sermon on the Mount is Jesus first set of teachings and The Judgment Discourse is his last.

Both pieces start with parallel passages that set the tone. The Sermon on the Mount begins with Blessings—that section of Matthew 5-7 that we have come to call The Beatitudes: Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted, and so on. The beginning of the Judgment Discourse in Matthew 23 instead begins with Woes, targeting the religious leaders who have forgotten their role as servants of the people and have become greedy and self-indulgent. If you think of Jesus only in sweet and comforting terms, refresh your memory a bit with the start of Matthew 23. If I preached like that here, it would probably blow down the tent and set it on fire.

Another thing the two sections share is Jesus' audience. In both cases Jesus is talking to insiders—his followers and faith leaders; and those circles overlap. When you stand up the two discourses side by side—the Sermon on the Mount at the start of Jesus' ministry and then the Judgment Discourse three years later, immediately before his betrayal and arrest—it's easier to understand why this final set of teachings has such a dark tone. Three years earlier, ignorance could be an excuse; but not now. Not by those insiders Jesus has been teaching and engaging with for all of that time. And the time remaining is short.

This last discourse is Jesus saying, almost in desperation, "You aren't getting it. This isn't just some pie-in-the-sky sweetness that I've been teaching you. It's the way you are either saved or destroyed; it's the very difference between heaven and hell. Parable after parable, flows out of him across the three chapters—different scenes, but all ending with dire warnings for those who don't get it right. Until at last he ends with the only detailed scene of the final judgment in the entire New Testament.

The Judgment Discourse begins by absolutely slamming those who think they are better than others and ends here, with care for "the least of these" as the only path to heaven. For those who continue to ignore the cries of those who are suffering, guess what? Remember that lake of fire you think is just made for the devil and his angels? Well, you're getting tossed in there, too.

It's as if he's saying, "Okay, enough with the parables. Let me be crystal clear. Care for others—all others, but especially the marginalized—is the only thing God is asking or has ever asked. The hungry, the naked, the thirsty, the prisoners, the sick, and anyone else society shoves aside as expendable? They are not. God is in them; I am in them. In fact, if you do it to them, you may as well have done it to me."

I don't think this passage on the sheep and the goats is Jesus teaching the technical details of the afterlife. I don't think he's confirming an actual lake of fire. This is a much more visceral reaction, and he reaches for a vivid image that the culture of his time would understand. I think it's no different than me saying I want extra levels of hell created in the infrastructure deal. I don't for a minute believe that there is a layered hell out there somewhere where God will torment people forever. That is so far beyond the God of love who I have known since childhood as to be laughable.

God loves you so very much that even if you were the only person on earth, God would still have come to earth in Jesus and died for just you. God's love is vast and everlasting beyond our comprehension; and if you don't believe that, that same God will torture you forever. I mean, come on. Those things do not go together. That's the script for a perpetrator of domestic violence, not the God revealed in Jesus. I'm a "no" on that. But would we humans create a place of unending torment and then try to gaslight everyone into believing it's a state of bliss approved by a loving God? Hmmm.

What I think Jesus is saying here is exactly what is playing out in our world right now and has played out in various ways across human history. When we begin to think that any category of human beings are undeserving of even the basic necessities of life; when societies are willing to let people starve, die of thirst, languish in prisons and hospitals, and not have the proper clothing to protect themselves from the elements, we're creating a hell that will swallow us all—and will keep swallowing us all forever if we keep it up.

And for those who are leaders and who actively prevent others from acting with care and compassion? The border patrol agents who destroy the water left by others for migrants at waypoints in the desert; the politicians who prevent others from protecting the vulnerable during a pandemic? Those woes in chapter 23 are for you. "Children of hell," Jesus calls them. "You lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them." "Whitewashed tombs." "Blind fools," beautiful on the outside but inside he says they are "full of the bones of the dead and all kinds of filth." I mean, imagine if there had been Twitter back then.

But while I don't believe he's talking about a literal lake of fire; he is talking about a literal hell of sorts. Ignoring the suffering of "the least of these," lands us in hell—not in some afterlife, but hell on earth in the here and now. And history bears that out. It's the stuff of genocides and pogroms and inequities that lead to bloody battles in the streets. Vast wealth inequality has invariably led to violent revolution. The powerful have sought to justify their privilege through dividing the oppressed and pitting them against each other in class warfare, racism or both. And it will last as long as we keep doing it, which can be forever.

But it doesn't have to be that way. Choosing the opposite—providing care for the marginalized and vulnerable—has the opposite result. Instead of creating hell, we are creating heaven; maybe only in small circles and with individuals at first. But, ultimately, in a time that might take a generation or more, the things that we've been taught are only available spiritually after we die become manifest on this earth. And that, too, can last forever. Those are the true hopes that can motivate us to get through each day. Every minute of every day we can choose whether to work toward heaven or work toward hell; and whatever we work for will become manifest in the here and now, even if it's just a glimpse; a moment. And we can use that glimpse to course correct, if needed.

I'm not saying there is no life after death. I am thoroughly convinced that our souls don't miss a beat just because our bodies give out. I also totally believe that God has a way of washing those souls in a perfect mixture of justice and mercy, even though I thoroughly reject the "burn in hell forever" or "sit on a cloud and play the harp" models that we have created and refined over the millennia. I just think afterlife isn't the most helpful term. I think it's all just life—the eternal now, in a variety of forms. Linear time is a human construct. In the bigger picture, it's all now. Eternal life isn't a concept for later; it's the reality in the here and now. And the conditions we inhabit in our eternal now are what we make of it. Forever.

At the end of Matthew 25, both the sheep and the goats are equally surprised that the things they did had any kind of eternal impact. Neither group recognized their actions as something that would even be on God's radar; let alone something that would place them in either eternal bliss or peril. Neither group recognized Jesus in those they helped or ignored. But **we've** had that information for over 2,000 years now. While we argue about whether there's a literal lake of fire after we die; hell on earth will consume us. The fires here are already lit. Will we, also, be blind guides? Or will we choose another way? Amen.