

Feeling Sheepish

Rev. Catherine Oxenford-Grant Reflection on Matthew 25: 31-46 Reign of Christ

Wall Street United Church

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“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...” [Matthew 25: 31-32]

One of the great joys of any visit to see my mother-in-law on Vancouver Island is a visit to Coombs, British Columbia, just a few miles up the road and up the mountain. It is the home of what can only be described as an Emporium, which is wonderfully and accurately titled “**Goat on the Roof**”. Actually, there is more than one real goat, usually three or four, chomping away on grass and hay...on the roof! They are lovely, and this gives me an even greater sympathy with the goats in the parable that we heard today. I know sheep are the emblem of docility and sweetness while goats can be cranky and obstinate – but wait a minute, I like goats!

And then I have to wrestle all over again with the mental images from childhood about sheep, goats, and this very curious concept of Christ the King. Yes, I am aware that I’ve spent far too much time contemplating pictures of separating these two farm animals into the distinct categories of those bound for eternal life

or destined for eternal damnation. It's a stark contrast of all or nothing — forever is a long time.

But, again it really isn't about animals or the relative merits of farm animals. Rather, we must keep our focus on Jesus, because, after all, it is Christ the King/Reign of Christ Sunday.

And so we find the Son of Man (aka the King of Everything) hanging out with the least, the lost, the poor and those in prison. How is it that we are supposed to understand that God is to be found in the dark and dirty places of the world? Winners are always more appealing than losers in this world, aren't they? We've got two sides of the coin compared one to the other — "Team Goat" and "Team Sheep". It seems that neither team noticed Jesus in amongst the messiness of everyday life. It seems "Team Goat" may have been keeping watch and being ready to roll, but weren't really aware of the King of Everything hanging out with them. Maybe they didn't think they needed to act just yet — the time had not yet come?? Waiting for the King of Everything to look like, well, a King...

And then there's "Team Sheep" busy keeping the neighbours fed, watered and loved while watching for the King out of the corner of their eyes??

I don't know about this metaphor at all — perhaps it made greater sense to the people who heard it first — but sheep or goat, it's all about relationships. No point in hanging around waiting for the "big event" is there? Or just listening to radio or TV that agrees with everything we think...or always being around people who look and sound just like ourselves? Where's the challenge in that??? I know I have

waited for the Second Coming, the Rapture with the holiest people I know ... and we're all still here!

So, big question ...Why are we still here? And the answer is...*"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...*

"[Matthew 25: 45]

So what do we do with that in our social media isolation, sometimes masking, carrying around water like there aren't any taps habit, hand washing and sanitizer reality?? Here's my take. I believe we are born to, as best we can in whatever circumstances we find ourselves, live each and every moment to the fullest — caring for one another, looking out for friends (and enemies too, if you have any!) Finding the most difficult and darkest places in our lives and shining light, the brightest we can find, into those places. And isn't that bright light the very light of Christ...the King of Everything? And when we shine that light, anywhere and everywhere, we can be Christmas lights, flashlights, candles. So shine that light! Jesus, the King of Everything, knows an awful lot about humankind — about our sufferings, our difficulties, our joys and triumphs. Jesus took real life and brokenness seriously — so seriously that he gave up everything in order to save all of creation. It wasn't some stunt for fame or attention. Jesus loved God and us with his life and his death, and that is exactly what he asks of us.

And so, it makes real sense that Jesus gives this lesson in the last week of his life. Being a sheep isn't really about rewards, however eternal they may be. Essentially, it's this: following the lead of the shepherd and *"loving others as he loved us and gave himself for us – as offering and sacrifice to God."* [Ephesians 5: 2]

Curious concept, Christ the King or Reign of Christ, whichever we call it — but curious, peculiar, different or unfamiliar, it's the very best thing in this world.

Thanks be to God.

Please pray with me.

Gracious God, *may we put away all bitterness and anger; being kind to one another, tenderhearted and forgiving as we have been forgiven. Let us be imitators of you, O God, as your beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. Amen. {Ephesians 5: 1-2}*