

Texts: Matthew 25:31-46
Subject: Sheep & Goats
Theme: Jesus is Coming - Look Busy
Fifth Sunday in Lent; April 7, 2019, Reformation Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV

Grace and peace to you from our Father in heaven and the Lord Jesus who is the Christ. Amen.

We teach our children to keep their hands to themselves. Jacob, of course at two-and-a-half, is still learning this lesson (and so many others). He's got a lot of energy, and is quite strong for his age. Special toys and things that belong to his older siblings are off limits. He can't climb in the fridge. He's not supposed to stand on the table, or take off his diaper, or throw food. There are so many rules. When he gets frustrated or is prevented from getting something or doing something he wants, he will try to hit. He's starting to know better. Wrestling with his buddy Noah has always been a favorite pastime. That should get interesting as they grow. (And we thank God that Reformation is a place where they can grow and learn and know they are loved.) But Jacob's learning that we do not hit. Sometimes, he will get very frustrated, and I can see him get so mad, that he wants to throw a punch, but he's trying to restrain his little arms from knocking my glasses off. I want him to know that our hands are for helping, not hitting. He's growing and learning every day. But he makes mistakes too, and when he breaks the rules, he has to go in his room for a time out. He really hates that. But he gets the point.

We don't like to be called out for our behavior. It can be uncomfortable, embarrassing, and hurtful. When we do something wrong, we don't want to be judged for it. But we need to be held accountable too.

This story of a shepherd separating sheep from goats seems to call out how we behave toward people in need, rewarding those who serve others, and condemning those who don't. This can be uncomfortable, especially for Lutherans who might hear righteousness that stems from works - but certainly for *all of us* who might wonder if we've done enough to serve 'the least of these.' Can we ever do enough? There is need all around. How much is expected? This might come across as fear inducing - like the bumper sticker "Jesus is coming - look busy!" or as Jesus' motivational speech - "All right you sheep, get out there and serve some people!" Or as a team captain choosing sides, "sheep on the right, goats on the left." This duality is explicit. Sheep are good. Goats are bad. The rhetorical question seems to be, "Which side are you on?"

But that's not the right question.

Jesus is not trying to prescribe a way of being as much as he is describing the way those who follow him will live. The sheep don't know they're sheep. The goats don't know they're goats. This good/bad, left/right, reward/punishment duality gets the attention of the people who hear it, then like all Jesus parables, tilts toward something new - Jesus isn't a sheep. He is not a goat. He's the person in need. Jesus is *one with* the hungry, thirsty, stranger. Jesus *is* the sick one, the unwelcome one, the hurting one, the lonely one. This one-ness breaks the binary understanding of the hearer.

It wakes us up and convicts us. It calls us out.

We don't like that. But we need it.

We need to be reminded when we're out of bounds. Every week here we claim the words of the Apostles Creed to confess our faith. This creed, our statement of belief, includes the admission of Jesus as the one who comes to judge the living and the dead

- all nations, all of creation. This is because we need it. We all make mistakes, and fall short of the glory of God. We need accountability. Jesus is the one who judges, not us.

Jesus explains that when his disciples were serving those in need, the hungry, the thirsty, naked, stranger, sick, or imprisoned they were serving Him. Jesus is one with those who are hungry & thirsty, the stranger, and the naked. Jesus is them. If in faith we are transformed into ones who will serve them, we will be serving Jesus.

It's really not asking a lot.

Jesus teaches that these were simple tasks, not done for any reward, or with a goal in mind. They provided basic needs for survival. People need to eat. People need clean water to drink. We need clothing, care when sick, and to feel a part of a group. Strangers, we can imagine, if not welcomed in a new place would be most vulnerable. They would not have the means of survival, and could be in danger of violence.

Ivy and I are teaching our kids about how to treat each other. Our hands are not for hitting. At night, before bed, we fold our hands, and we say prayers. We talk about God's unending love and I tell them there's nothing they could ever do to make me love them less. And God is the same way with us. There's nothing we can do to make God love us more, no mistake we could make that makes God love us any less. I don't expect an award for telling my kids I love them. But more than telling, we show our children we love them when we feed them, clothe them, care for them when they're sick, and make them feel welcome in our family. Our actions speak louder than our words.

Jesus tells this parable just before they head to the city of Jerusalem. Where Jesus will be betrayed, and handed over to be crucified, but not before he washes the

feet of his disciples. He serves them. He would go on to the cross, where God's actions serve to speak even louder than our words can. God's grace was poured out for the whole world, through the cross, and we hungry,

When in faith, we are transformed into disciples, we find that we are ones in need too. We recognize our own shortcomings, our own failures, our lack of generosity and hospitality. We are ones in need of God's grace.

Because of God's love, we get to care for all God's people in God's creation no matter how they look or smell, or walk, or crawl. God's love transforms us - from a mentality that fears the judge of the world, that says, "Jesus is coming - look busy!" to ones who give thanks for God's grace and in love for our neighbors find ways to serve. That makes a difference in the kingdom.

There's no shortage of need. Jesus will tell his friends, "the poor you will always have with you." Again, descriptive, not prescriptive. Serve others. It sounds obvious - but it bears repeating. The need of the least of those among us is important to God. The need is great. People everywhere are hurting and you might not even know it. The rise of PTSD, increasing rates of suicide, depression, and mental illness seem to have touched everyone. Everyday we can see pictures of families, refugees at our own border, children in need of safety and protection - people in great need. We see strangers in need of food, shelter, and welcome.

What are disciples of Jesus doing?

They are opening shelters, serving in communities affected by flooding and fires, serving meals in food deserts, handing out clothing, traveling across the sea to heal and help, meeting people where they are and finding out what they need to survive.

Love is service. We don't serve others for a reward. God already showed his love and gave us the best gift we could ever receive in Jesus, his Son, and the way we love God is to love and serve ALL the children of the kingdom, as they are God's people. It's what disciples do. It's what hands are for.

Amen.