**The Great Sorting**

**Preached at First Worship, Old South Church Boston**

**on November 23rd 2014**

**Scripture: 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, 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."

Today, the Sunday before Thanksgiving is also the last Sunday of the Church year. Next week we will begin the “watchful waiting” of Advent, but this last Sunday we anticipate the “Reign of Christ”, the coming of “the Prince of Peace”.

And so, today, we look back on Jesus’ last days on earth.

Jesus is in Jerusalem with the disciples, his friends and followers. What he has been foretelling, in the verses leading up to today’s scripture, is troublesome to say the least. He has predicted that the temple will be destroyed, and there will be wars and rumors of wars, famines and earthquakes. Nations will rise up against nations. There will be “false messiahs” and all kinds of confusion. Jesus tells his disciples that in a few days he will be taken away and crucified. They will be left alone, to face the chaotic coming times, left with the promise that in the fullness of time Jesus will return to them in glory.

I think the disciples could be excused for being worried. They are facing the prospect of being disconnected from Jesus, their source of comfort and guidance. They are soon to be cast loose, like sheep without a shepherd. So Jesus gives them a vision, of how things will be in the end, so that they will know where to find him while he is gone.

It is a vision of the end of days, in which he “the son of man” will return in glory, appearing both as a reigning monarch and a shepherd. All nations are gathered around him and he is sorting sheep from goats. This is how Jesus’ followers, appear in this final scene – either as sheep or goats. The criterion for sorting is simple. In the time that Jesus was gone from the earth did they, or did they not, feed Jesus when he was hungry, welcome Jesus when he was a stranger, visit him when he was sick or in prison, give him something to drink when he was thirsty? The sheep have done all of these things, but the goats have not.

Both the sheep and the goats are confused and surprised.

"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?”

Both the sheep and the goats ask the same questions.

And the answer is the same in both cases: Jesus has been with them all the time – present to them in the hungry, the naked, the stranger, the sick and those in prison. The difference is that the sheep showed mercy and compassion while the goats did not.

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When I hear this story I anxiously wonder how I will be sorted. Like a nervous first-year Hogwarts student, faced with the sorting hat and hoping for Gryffindor, I try to imagine how I will get into the sheep’s group…

Am I a sheep because I gave $5 to someone on the street who asked? Or am I a goat because I kept the remaining $40 in my wallet for myself?

Am I a sheep because I donated coats for the “naked” when asked, or I am I a goat because I still have a closet full of warm clothing to suit every occasion?

Am I sheep because I made meals for the un-housed guests who sometimes stay at my home church … or am I a goat because I’ve enjoyed numerous cozy suppers with only my own family?

Am I a sheep because I have extended a generous welcome to those on the margins, on occasions … or am I a goat, because, oblivious to my white (and other) privilege, I’ve acted in ways that are hurtful to those who do not have those privileges?

Am I a sheep because I will find a way to feed the hungry this month, or a goat because I do it so that I can eat my Thanksgiving turkey without feeling guilty?

This kind of anxiety gets me nowhere. If I am totaling my acts of mercy this way, balancing the positive column against the negative, it seems unlikely I am really a sheep. Am I more concerned about my own standing in the final judgment, being sure to recognize Jesus, than simply loving my brothers and sisters on the margins?

But, of course, whether I am a sheep or a goat doesn’t really matter. What matters is that Jesus is always present in surprising ways.

This makes me think of an occasion when I was a working as a chaplain intern in a long-term care facility. I hadn’t been working there long, when my supervisor told me there was a new woman on the unit, close to the end of her life. She was quite isolated. Could I add her to my list of visits?

I wanted to be sure to get to her, so later that afternoon I made my way to this woman’s room at the end of the hallway. Her brain was addled from the disease she was suffering and the treatments she had received. She had not been communicating well with the nursing staff and the other patients. It seemed that they had decided to leave her alone. In her stark room there were a few pictures of good-looking well-dressed family members. But it seemed they, also, had decided to leave her alone. And so she looked up to me from the hospital bed, and threw her arms up in despair, “I never expected to end up like this!” she cried.

After we had sat for a while, the darkness of the evening was drawing in. I offered to say a blessing for her. I felt sadly inadequate. As a Jewish patient she deserved a well-spoken Hebrew blessing, but that was beyond me. I pulled out my booklet of Jewish blessings, and read in English. Our eyes met and hers welled with tears. Even as the words were less than traditional, the feeling that passed between us was filled with a holy presence.

“Thank you,” she said, “thank you for being here, thank you for coming.” I touched her hand good bye, and on the drive home I silently prayed “thank *you* for being here, Jesus, thank *you* for coming.”

And so now I have a sense of why Jesus would have us visit him while he is sick: because it gives us a sense of his holy presence. My time with this woman was not simply a satisfying “feel good” experience. We had been there together, sharing suffering and isolation for a few moments while we looked into each other’s eyes.

This is just one connection that I have made, but I was struck by one of the insights from the house meetings last Sunday here at Old South Church. One person, full of compassion and love for *all* who suffer, said:

“If something is happening to someone else it is happening to me.”

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She was talking of the power of connection with one another. She lamented the ways in which we have become so disconnected in our world today:

- The elite are disconnected from the struggling,

- the left from the right

- gay from straight

- wealthy from impoverished…

- The housed are disconnected from the un-housed

- clothed from naked

- the well-hydrated from the thirsty

- the free from the incarcerated

- the healthy from the sick.

Jesus is the one who meets us in the connections we go out of our way to make. The borders of separation, the boundaries of social grouping: that is where we can recognize the Good Shepherd.

Over the past 2000 years we Christians have looked for Jesus in the lofty places: the lovely sanctuary, the stunning cathedral, in the candle lit retreat, in stunning visual art, in transporting music, in complex theologies, and in scholarly sermons. All these things may serve to build us up, center us, challenge and call us to deeper questioning.

But in the vision we have today, of the Reign of Christ, Jesus invites us to find him by crossing boundaries and the borders to the ones from whom we have been disconnected.

If we are sheep – and I know that we are – we will know where to find the shepherd.

Go and find the shepherd, you know where

… go and find.

Thanks be to God,

Amen!