

## **“From Goats to GOATs”**

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts  
November 22, 2020 – Reign of Christ/Thanksgiving Sunday  
Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Matthew 25:31-46

In the animal world, the word goat refers to a cloven-footed, delightfully furry mammal of the *bovidae* family. Or in the sports world, GOAT refers to the Greatest of All Time. Think of people like Serena Williams, Tom Brady, and Michael Jordan, champion athletes who have been dominant in their sports, especially on the biggest stages, and who amaze and inspire us by their greatness. In today’s sermon, I will be discussing both kinds of goats, the greatest of the great kind and the gregarious four-legged kind.

The animal kind, as we just heard in today’s scripture lesson from Matthew, get a bad rap. In the band Cake’s paraphrase of today’s reading, “Sheep go to heaven; goats go to hell.”<sup>1</sup> That’s great for the sheep, but not so great for the poor goats, which is a shame because goats are such wonderful creatures. In fact, if you’re ever having a rough day, I recommend going online and watching videos of baby goats; this remedy is sure to make you feel a bit better. Whatever did these delightful beings do to deserve banishment from God’s presence anyway, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth? As the story goes, the crime of the goats is that they were unconcerned for the lowly.

This story of judgment is the final of three stories told by Jesus in his sermon to his disciples on the Mount of Olives, known as the Olivet Discourse. As we’ve learned over the last couple of weeks by reading through this discourse together, it is in the apocalyptic tradition that employs symbols and stories to talk about the perfect justice of God

---

<sup>1</sup> John McCrea, “Sheep Go to Heaven” (Nashville, Tennessee: Capricorn Records, 1998).

that will ultimately come to all people. Two weeks ago, we learned in the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids that God expects people to keep their lamps trimmed and burning, to be vigilant and ready for the coming day of justice. Last week, we read the Parable of the Talents, in which we learned that God blesses people and expects them to use and grow those blessings rather than hide them away.

Today's reading is the culmination of the discourse. It is, in fact, the final sermon given by our great teacher in this gospel, offered just before he went on to demonstrate the fullness of his greatness through giving his very life for the good of others. In this final, lofty message, the pinnacle of his teaching offered from a mountaintop, we learn that the ultimate way to be prepared for the coming of the day of justice and the ultimate way to use and grow the blessings of God is by being agents of divine love and blessing in this moment, especially to those most in need of love and blessing.

This lofty message of Jesus to his disciples, then and now, is to humbly demonstrate love for the lowly. His message echoes the call to be ultimately concerned for the good of the other that we find in the Prophets. As Micah writes, "What is good, and what does the LORD require of you but to *do justice*, and to *love mercy*, and to *walk humbly* with your God?" (Micah 6:8). This emphasis to do good for the other, especially the lowly, is also found throughout the Christian New Testament, especially in the Gospel of Matthew and in the letter of Jesus' brother James, who writes, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: To care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world" (James 1:27). For James, loving the lowly is the *purest* expression of our faith, and this pure expression of faith is an act of worship, for by serving the other, we are serving God, as it is written in the Book of Proverbs: "Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD" (Proverbs 19:17).

As sheep of God's flock, we embrace this calling and dedicate ourselves to loving God by loving and blessing the lowly in our midst. In this community of faith, we do this through providing food to the hungry. We do this through our monetary gifts to support this good work and our other work here. And we have no idea how God is working to use these gifts, expressions of our own thanksgiving, to create even greater blessings in our world.

Perhaps you saw the news this week that country music legend Dolly Parton offered a gift of a million dollars to the Vanderbilt University Medical Center back in April that ended up being used along with other funds to support the development of a vaccine for Covid-19 that appears to be effective and safe. She was unaware that her gift actually helped fund this vaccine until she was named as a research donor in a report just printed in the New England Journal of Medicine. Her substantial gift did even more substantial work than she imagined it could have. Indeed, this gift will be a great blessing to the whole world. Dolly Parton, one of the greats of country music, demonstrated, as she has throughout her life, that she is not only a great musician, but one of the truly great sheep among us, and God was able to take her great gift and make it even greater!

On this final Sunday of the liturgical year, we join with Dolly and billions of other sheep in celebrating the Christ, *the* greatest of all time, reigning among us and throughout the world. And we move to a new season of Advent, during which we anticipate the new ways that Christ will come to us and reign over us. Let us join with Christ in doing something lovely and new in the lives of the lowly this day.

And as we do so, let us avoid claiming the role that belongs alone to Christ, the Son of Man: The role of righteous judge. This is important for us to remember this day, especially as we witness and are infuriated by so much injustice in our world: Christ is the judge; we are but sheep.

So let us not cast our judgment on others, determining who is a sheep and who is a goat. Rather, let us fight against our tendency to do this and our willingness to allow this to be done in our midst.

Certainly, this is a challenge for us, especially in this holiday season. We all know that being an agent of peace and love during holiday gatherings of family or friends, whether they happen in person or online, can take the patience of Job and the strength of Samson, as it's all too easy to get into arguments about politics, religion, or which athletes truly are the greatest of all time. But remember this: It's better to be related than it is to be right. You don't need to convince someone to change their opinion or way of looking at the world. And you don't need to turn them into a goat in your mind or speech because of their difference. Try to see Christ living in the other just as they are.

Fellow sheep, on this Reign of Christ Sunday, as we remember and celebrate the Good Shepherd's guiding presence among us, let us follow the teaching of Christ to love the other, especially those who are lowly or unlovable. As we move into Advent and seek Emmanuel, God with Us, let us seek to find Christ's presence among us now as he lives in the other. And let us be amazed and inspired by the great ones of our faith, people like Saint Dolly of Tennessee, and Saint Teresa of Calcutta, who dedicated her life to lifting up the lowest of the lowly, and Saint Francis of Assisi, who humbly sought to be used by God to bless people and all of God's creatures, including the goats.

May our prayer this day, be this prayer of Francis:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:  
where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
where there is injury, pardon;  
where there is doubt, faith;  
where there is despair, hope;

where there is darkness, light;  
where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek  
to be consoled as to console,  
to be understood as to understand,  
to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive,  
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,  
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.  
Amen.