

## “Sorting Sheep”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts  
November 26, 2023 - Twenty-Sixth Sunday after Pentecost/Reign of  
Christ Sunday - Prop. 29

[Ezekiel 34:11-16; Matthew 25:31-46](#)

Have you followed this week’s amazing story about the journey of Sam Altman? Just over a week ago, he had been removed from his role as CEO of OpenAI, an important company that is a leader in developing Artificial Intelligence technology, such as their ChatGPT AI chatbot (which, by the way, definitely *did not* write today’s sermon). The board of OpenAI canned Mr. Altman along with another of the company’s founders and president last Friday, but it wasn’t long after that that word began spreading that Microsoft would be hiring Altman, along with any of the other employees who left along with him, to start a new AI research team. On Monday, 500 of OpenAI’s other workers, 90% of its staff, signed a letter stating that they would be following Altman to work for Microsoft...unless the OpenAI’s board re-instated Altman as CEO. If these employees had left the company *en masse* such as this, OpenAI would have been ruined as a company. Microsoft, which invested heavily in OpenAI, owning 49% of it, had no desire to see the company fail, and so pushed for the board of OpenAI to reverse course and re-hire Sam Altman as CEO. By Tuesday of this week, he was back, the board members who pushed him out were sacked from their positions, and a new board was formed. For Sam Altman and for Microsoft, the wild week produced a big win, but for the (former) board of OpenAI, it was a colossal, epic fail.

Wins and losses -- victories leading to joyous celebration, like Sam Altman’s clinching of his position as CEO, and epic failures leading to weeping and gnashing of teeth, like the failure and fallout manufactured by OpenAI’s former board -- have been recurring themes of our gospel lessons from today and the last two weeks. We heard a couple weeks ago in Jesus’ parable of the ten bridesmaids that five of them were prepared and successful in doing their job of wielding lamps as part of a wedding procession, but five others failed by not coming prepared with enough oil to keep their lamps lit when the procession got delayed, and so they were out shopping for oil in the middle of the night (perhaps at the

24-hour lamp oil superstore?) instead of lighting the way for a bride and groom to come to the grand wedding banquet. We heard in last Sunday's lesson, Jesus offering his parable of the talents, in which two servants of a wealthy traveler who were given large sums of money to work experienced big wins and joyous celebration when the wealthy traveler returned to find that they had doubled the investments, but a third servant did not invest the money as expected and required, instead burying the money in the ground and later returning it to the wealthy traveler in full, but with no gains on the investment. This third servant, like the five unprepared bridesmaids, produced only an epic fail.

In today's gospel lesson, the final reading of our year-long journey through the book of Matthew, we heard Jesus' teaching about how people, on the day of judgment, will be divided by God based on their production, just as a shepherd, who has a mixed herd of sheep and goats and generally lets them graze together, sorts and splits them up, so that the sheep can do their sheep things, like making wool, and the goats to do their goat things, like producing milk. Jesus teaches that those who are sheep, which are always in the Hebrew scriptures a symbol of God's people, as we heard in the reading from Ezekiel, will demonstrate that they are sheep by doing sheep things, like feeding the hungry, providing water to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, and visiting the prisoner, for in serving those most in-need of help, they serve God, who loves all people and desires for all to experience goodness. Those who fail to do these sheep things demonstrate that, though they might look like sheep, they're actually goats, and they miss out on enjoying the blessings of being part of God's flock of sheep. In this lesson, we are taught that what truly matters in this life, what separates those who are victorious in using their lives to produce what God desires from those who fail in this task of life, is how we show God's love to those who need it most.

In doing God's work of loving others, we demonstrate that we belong to God's flock of care-givers, we show that God was wise to invest treasures of love in us as we take this resource and make more with it, and we light the way that leads us and others away from a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth to where we can experience a joyous banquet in the presence of God.

I believe that this vision of a joyous feast of the blessed flock is not just one of what becomes of us in eternity, but is for us here and now as we live on the earth. I believe that God is present with us now, and God desires for us as we live to reveal more of that presence through our own faithful acts of love, that the realm of God may grow here as God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. I believe that we are called, as God's loving sheep, not to pray for an escape from this world, or that we might be safely hidden away from the world's people and their needs, but that we would become more actively engaged in doing God's work to renew the world.

Sam Altman, before he was canned and then reinstated as CEO of OpenAI, in an interview by the *New York Times* about the direction, good or bad, that the advent of Artificial Intelligence is taking us, said, "I think we're heading towards the best world ever."

Now there is much to be concerned about in our world. Surely, the awesome potential of AI to produce evil and/or good is one such cause for concern, as are violence and war in the world, climate change, and all else that causes people to suffer; but I believe, like Sam Altman, that we are heading toward the creation of a better world. I don't believe, however, that this due to the advent of AI, although it has the potential to be a great tool for making the world better for all people, but because of the advent and growth of God's reign of light and life among us as we live in love.

Friends, let us not fail to do our job; rather, let us live in love and let us be channels of God's peace. Today, may Christ reign over us, may Christ realm grow among us, and may the growing light and life of Christ change the world through us. Amen.