

Sermon 11-23-2014 “When?” Matthew 25:31-46 Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

Courtroom dramas in books and television have been popular for years. In my younger days, Perry Mason always came through with that certain piece of evidence that surprised everybody by revealing the guilty one to be one nobody had suspected - all in one brief television show. The gasps and the fact that the perpetrator received proper justice were deeply satisfying. It's the same with *Law and Order* today. In most of the shows, the “bad guy” (male or female) gets tripped up and caught and the innocent get vindicated. Justice is served in less than an hour!

Unfortunately, real life trials rarely seem to work that way. Today Missouri awaits the challenging decision as to whether the policeman who killed the young unarmed teenager, Michael Brown, should be charged or not. Whatever the grand jury decides, there will be a lot of upset over this issue. We've seen a lot of trials that don't give satisfaction: The case in Florida where Trayvon Martin was shot dead by George Zimmerman. Lots of people feel uncomfortable with the results of that trial. Years ago there was O. J Simpson's trial and the Jon Benet Ramsey case, deeply unsatisfying because the real killers – whoever they were – were never brought before the bar of justice to face their punishment. And then there are all the huge corporate crimes that seem to ruin so many lives while the perpetrators usually get off with very little justice.

The Gospel lesson for today presents the kind of court scene we enjoy – that is, *if* we can picture ourselves as sheep and not goats. There is an accounting of what has been done, and the rewards and punishments are based on right or wrong actions. The truth comes out clearly. The Judge-King has full knowledge. We have viewed the preliminaries in the Gospel lessons over the past few weeks: the Master comes home to ask the servants what they have done with the money that had been entrusted to them; the bridegroom enters with those maidens who have brought extra oil while those who were not prepared have been locked out. And now we have the final judgment scene, where the Son of Man returns to sit on the throne, and all the nations and people gather round to hear the pronouncements of justice.

The surprising thing about this scene is that those who have gathered do not seem to have any idea as to what the basis of judgment will be. Jesus says the Judge will call the people either sheep or goats, the former of course being more prized than the latter. And the judge will say to those on the right, the sheep, “Come, enter into my glory. For you see, when I was hungry you gave me something to eat, and when I was thirsty you gave me something to drink, and when I was naked you gave me some clothes, and when I was in prison you visited me.’

Then to the goats – those people on the left – the judge will say, "Get away from me,

because when I was hungry you didn't feed me, and when I was thirsty you gave me nothing to drink, and when I was naked you didn't give me anything to wear, and when I was in prison you never came to visit me."

And all the people **on both sides** of the judge will say, "I don't remember that, when did we see you hungry, thirsty, naked, or in prison?" And the king in all his glory will say, "If you did it for one of the least – for any hungry, thirsty, naked, prisoner – you did it for me." And perhaps then the sheep will be saying, "Boy, am I glad that I remembered to bring in that can of food for the food pantry and that I worked in the soup kitchen one day! Whew! What a blessing that I gave money for the earthquake victims and that I helped that woman who didn't have enough money in the grocery line!"

But the goats will probably be saying, "Hey, wait, that's not fair! I didn't know the rules of this game! If I had known that was YOU, I would have helped; I thought it was some poor illegal alien in prison who deserved what he got! What was a nice person like you doing in that kind of condition anyway? How was I supposed to know?" (Edited from WWE)

In the reading from the Gospel of Matthew, the ones given approval at the end had simply responded to the human need around them. They had not known that they were doing anything for God, but they had noticed the needs of other people and acted out of compassion.

These days, probably every one of us is pretty good at *not* seeing certain things or people. When I used to travel to NYC on a regular basis, I learned how to walk through the Port Authority with ears quick to pick up the sound of a jangling cup and then to focus my attention away from the person holding it. Our minds are adept at denying the need: "That person probably makes a lot of money, begging there on that corner. This one will likely buy some drugs if I give him anything. Why encourage such behavior?" But Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats would grab any of us who would like to cast our gaze elsewhere and warn us: "Open your hearts to what is around you, for your very lives - YOUR lives - depend on what you see and how you respond!"

There is no way around the message and warning of today's gospel lesson: What we do in our daily lives matters. We bring judgment upon ourselves as we show mercy or fail to show mercy. "When?" is NOW.

Sometimes I act like a sheep, but lots of times, I am a goat. We all are. This parable is not meant just to scare us into being generous, so that we make our way through our lives as though we're in a field of land mines: "Oh, no, I'd better be kind here; this derelict might be Jesus in disguise!" There is something *much*

*deeper* here. By entering into such a way of life that we do seek to be merciful and kind and generous - realizing that by so doing we are loving God - our own lives are slowly but surely transformed and made new. Every day becomes more and more a time when we can consciously make an offering to God, by doing something we might not "normally" think to do. "The one who loses his life for my sake will find it." (Matthew 10:39) Jesus spoke the truth.

The dying words of the German poet Goethe were 'Light, light, let there be more light.' 20th Century philosopher Miguel de Unamuno reflected on these words, and said, 'It is not more light we need, but more warmth. Warmth, warmth, more warmth! We die of cold, not of darkness. It is not the night that kills, but the frost.' The frost is when one person refuses to see another as a brother or sister.

We're all busy, each in our own ways. We've got all kinds of concerns and troubles. We may feel very poor or like "nobodies," and believe that we have little to offer in this world. The Bible would tell us to look at our lives again, and to let our eyes and our perceptions be opened in new ways.

If God is God, then our lives are gifts. If God is God, then our lives are meant to be God's instruments. If God is God, then what you and I do today and every day is of tremendous consequence. "WHEN" is now! May our lives show full love of and thanks to God. May we live out our thanks and make the world warmer, in the name of Jesus. Amen.