

“What Gets Your Goat?” – January 8, 2017
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Matthew 25:31-46

Jesus used the parable of the goats and the sheep to call attention to his authority. St. Matthew observes an exalted Christology, and while the angels are quite busy, the assembled nations are not. Jesus’ power and authority highlight the people’s passivity, when Jesus separates them into two groups: the goats and the sheep.

It may be that you and I are inclined to think of goats as bad and sheep as good. Do we assume that the right is good and the left is bad? Do we see those who are active as good and the passive as bad?

Jesus summons the nations to action: *“Come, you that are blessed [passive voice] by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you [passive voice] from the foundation of the world”* (v. 34). And, *“For I was in need and you took care of me”* (vv. 35-36). Taking care of people who need help at whatever level is what People of the Way do. We lend a hand, share some food, spend some time.

Note what our text does not say: *“‘I was sick and you healed me,’ or ‘I was in prison and you liberated me.’”* Frederick Dale Bruner writes, *“No, but the upright answer Jesus. ‘Righteousness’ in St. Matthew’s gospel means correct behavior of those who follow God.”*

Virtue or righteousness is what we do or how we act. The passive life is the shut-in life. Initially, the righteous response to this parable was *“Huh?”* It wasn’t that the followers were astonished at the presentation of what they had done. They were self-aware. They were surprised at who were the ones who received what they had done.

Jesus said, *“What you did to one of the least of these, you did to me.”* That’s a wonderfully personal response! It’s not a global reply, *“Go feed the world.”*

Rather, it's "*Find a hungry person and feed her.*" The result of this simple act is the God's Kingdom is being equipped and people are blessed. Do you catch Jesus' parable? The verbs of this parable indicate that the Kingdom of God is not only being organized just for the 'carers' but BY those who care for others: see, when we are Followers of the Way, we are facilitating the Kingdom into which we are accepted.

"You that are accursed. . ." See the passive voice again? This time, however, Jesus doesn't say "*by my Father.*" Is it, therefore, implied? Or, does God have to deliver the blessing whereas being 'cursed' is a matter of simply being passive? Not responding to the offered blessing? "*You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels*" (v. 41).

Those who do not act cannot believe it. It's not a matter of being flabbergasted at what they have 'not done.' They KNOW that! They are staggered about who they have abandoned. "Unfair!" They object. "We would have done something if we knew it was you, Jesus! We would NEVER have been passive!" *They are astounded.*

Time is finite, however. The parable says that the opportunity for proper human accomplishment ends, and divine reaction to human action, or lack of, begins. We all know that human death is a reality except Jesus comes again before we die.

Those of us who attempt to live like Jesus, as Followers of the Way, taking care of others, at the same time, taking care of Jesus, are also taking care of the Kingdom of God. In so doing, we bring blessing to other people. Not being of a scientific nature, I do remember one of the Laws of Thermodynamics: "*For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.*" So, not doing the Kingdom of God business as Jesus did, does not bring blessing to others or an increase in the Kingdom.

So, it seems to me then, one of the works of the Holy Spirit is to help us grow while keeping us vulnerable to life and love itself. People of the Way never cease growing and looking for opportunities for change. How odd to think that so much

of religion is a matter of worshiping the status quo, until it dawns on you that what your ego hates most of all is change.

Remember, how you do anything is how you do everything. Be aware of the how of your live, more than the what, even if that sounds dangerous. It is fabulous what the fourteenth century Sufi mystic Hafiz wrote: *"I am a hole in a flute that Christ's breath moves through—listen to this music."*

And, like some of the medieval maps that sometimes read *"Here be dragons,"* here be irony. The incentive for our persistent search for God is gratitude for the already gift of God received!

Here it is in a nutshell: the exalted Christology that this parable begins with has integrity only when it is combined with lowly service also revealed in the parable. After all, Jesus was made incarnate as the very least of us. Our salvation is tied more to our relationship with Jesus in the least of the poor, the down cast, than our faith in Jesus as God. Does that get your goat? Alleluia Amen.