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“Compassion is King”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth
Ezekiel 34: 11-16, 20-24; Psalm 100; Matthew 25: 31-46

November 23, 2008

Jesus is in the final days of his life,

just prior to his triumphal entry into Jerusalem,
where his adversaries will meet him and welcome him “aright”;
where he will be crucified, dead, and buried.

And on his way to the cross, he scatters six final parables like seeds;

this last parable pertaining to his second coming,
his triumphal *re-entry* at the end of time,

when he will return in heavenly glory with all the angels.

And he will take his kingdom throne amidst the gathered nations,

and separate his subjects like a Shepherd King

might sway his staff and separate sheep from goats:

Phylum: Chordata; Class: Mammalia; Order: Artiodactyla Family: Bovidae

Subfamily: Caprinae

Genus: **Capra**, to the left,

Phylum: Chordata; Class: Mammalia; Order: Artiodactyla Family: Bovidae

Subfamily: Caprinae

Genus: **Ovis**, to the right.

So much in common; so little that stands to separate

the Shepherd King's subjects on his glorious day of return.

When I was a child growing up as a member
of Covenant Presbyterian Church in downtown Charlotte,
my mother used to have us sit on the left-hand side of the church,
facing the chancel,
because she said that was the Democratic side of the church.

I wonder what that was all about?

And then when my father was in the last days of his life in 1993,
and making his final plans about
where he wished his ashes to be interred
in the cross-shaped columbarium
that lies in the memorial garden at Covenant,
he told me to make sure that he ended up on the right-hand of God.
I was never sure if that meant the right side as you were facing the cross,
or the right side as the cross lies.

What is it that will sway the Shepherd King's staff
to the left of to the right when he comes again?

A man came to the church door last Monday night
as a group was holding a meeting in the foyer.
He was one of our "regulars" whom I have seen before
around the church grounds, although I could not call him by name.

"I'm hungry," he said. "My children at home are hungry.

We need food to eat

and Urban Ministry's food pantry is closed tonight."

And when I did not react immediately, he added one more thing,
which seems to be the new mantra on the street
for adding validity to an appeal:

"Oh, and by the way, I voted for Obama," he said.

Somewhat amused, and somewhat bemused

by this new angle of solicitation,

I responded to his plea with goat-like skepticism

but with sheep-like compassion.

I did not give him money, but instead invited him to wait

while I filled a bag with some collected non-perishable foods,

like canned spaghetti, Spam, and crackers,

intended for the Durham food bank and gave it to him.

He left somewhat encouraged,

and he left me feeling like a goat in sheep's clothing.

And sometimes I wonder if the greatest sin of Presbyterians

is our tendency to over-think everything.

What is it that will sway the Shepherd King's staff when he comes again?

Will it be good enough to think like a goat, but to act like a sheep?

In many ways, this final parable of Jesus in Matthew

just prior to his crucifixion, calls to my mind

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s final speech

delivered in Memphis on April 3, 1968,

as he also stood on the cusp of eternal life,

in much the same way as Jesus stands at that

same point of transition.

And what most of us probably remember from that final speech

are Dr. King's closing lines:

"We've got some difficult days ahead," he said.

"But it does not matter with me now,

because I've been to the mountaintop....

And I've looked over and I've seen the promised land.

I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight,

that we, as a people, will get to the promised land.

And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything.

I'm not fearing any man.

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

Just as Jesus had modeled foresight on the edge of his life,

Dr. King also was looking *ahead* to the promised land,

and he was looking *up* to the coming glory of the Lord.

But as he did that, what he was *looking at* and *looking out for* here on earth,

were the lowly, underpaid sanitation workers in Memphis,

the garbage men,

who were being treated, themselves, like refuse.

"The issue is injustice," Dr. King said that night.

"The issue is the refusal of Memphis to be fair and honest

in its dealing with its public servants,

who happen to be sanitation workers.

Now we've got to keep attention on that...that there are thirteen hundred

of God's children here suffering, sometimes going hungry,

going through dark and dreary nights wondering

how this thing is going to come out. That's the issue.

And we've got to say to the nation: we know it's coming out.

For when people get caught up with that which is right

and they are willing to sacrifice for it,

there is no stopping point short of victory."

What is it that will sway the Shepherd King's staff when he comes again?

It is looking up, to the coming of the Lord,

looking ahead, to the promised land,

AND *looking at* and *looking out for* those around us in these troubled times,

who, perhaps, have been laid off or who have lost their jobs;

who, perhaps, are on the verge of losing homes to foreclosure;

who, perhaps, are coming to our doors hungry,

looking for food to feed their families;
and responding to them *rightly* with sacrificial compassion.
Because in God's coming glory, as Jesus tells it,

compassion is king!

In the end, what will sway the Shepherd King's staff in one's favor
is not a declaration of faith, not an oath of allegiance,
not a bowing of knee or a confessing of tongue
that Jesus Christ is Lord, as one might expect.

Rather, it is a state of heart that responds to injustice and neighbor-need
with small and great acts of overt compassion.

It's looking heavenward and thinking, "who's hungry?"

It's looking at glory and thinking, "garbage men".

It's looking at the promised land and thinking, "promised homes lost".

It's looking at the Son of Man and thinking, "so many on food stamps".

Jesus deflects attention away from himself in this final parable.

And although he will come again in glory, and sit on a throne surrounded
by myriads of people representing all ethnicities on earth,
HIS kingship will not be the focus of that final gathering.

Rather, compassion as king will be the measure
by which the nations will be judged;
by which Shepherd King will sway his staff,
either to the right or to the left;
either to the righteous or the left out.

The good news here is that ours is not the task of judging.

As a matter of fact, our rush to judgment may actually impede our urges
to react to dire human need with compassionate action.

"The major block to compassion," says Rev. Diane Berke,
"is the judgment in our minds.

Judgment is the primary tool of separation."

But according to the parable, judgment is not ours; but compassion IS ours.

In the final reckoning, Jesus is Lord, **but compassion is king**.

And as bulls and bears are slugging it out on Wall Street,

Jesus directs our attention to sheep and goats who

either feel or don't feel the pain of the slighted,

the imprisoned, the impoverished, the impaired, the immigrant.

In the final reckoning, all we have to do is care,

to let people know that we care about them,

and to demonstrate that we care by

seeing, visiting, clothing, feeding, and inviting;

by "doing justice, loving kindness,

and walking humbly with our God" (Micah 6:8).

Sometimes we see the Gospel being practiced,

and sometimes we overhear it being preached over the telephone.

I caught the tail-end of a phone conversation the other day,

between a friend of mine and her husband;

neither a church member here; neither even Presbyterian.

I was eavesdropping, I have to admit, on what apparently

was a discussion about stewardship giving plans for the coming year.

Now talking about money is a pretty private thing,

and perhaps I should have left the room,

but the curious cat in me made me stay to see what she would say,

and how another church might view stewardship in a year

of such financial uncertainty and hardship.

And the gist of her side of the conversation went something like this:

"No, it's not about the church staying afloat.

No, it's not about fulfilling the budget.

No, it's not so we can continue to carry on our programs.

No, it's not so that we can give our staff a raise.

It's so we can be prepared.....to share with people
who might not have enough to get by this year."

And the Holy Spirit tapped the end of his nose and whispered, "Bingo",
in my ear, because my friend was so in line with
Jesus' closing argument to his faithful followers:

in the end, Jesus implies, **compassion is king.**

And the Holy Spirit tapped the end of his nose and whispered, "Bingo",
in my ear, because my friend was so in line with
the thinking and acting of the early church, where

"all believers were together and had everything in common;
selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone
who was in need." (Acts 2: 44-45)

Because in the end, Jesus implies, **compassion is king.**

I want to close with a quote from Howard Thurman:

God is making room in my heart for compassion:

the awareness that where my life begins, is where your life begins;
the awareness that the sensitiveness to your needs
cannot be separated from the sensitiveness to my needs;
the awareness that the joys of my heart are never mine alone –
nor are my sorrows.

I struggle against the work of God in my heart;

I want to be let alone.

I want my boundaries to remain fixed, that I may be at rest.

But even now, as I turn to God in the quietness,

God's work in me is ever the same.

God is at work enlarging the boundaries of my heart." Amen.

(Thurman. *Meditations of the Heart*. P. 49)