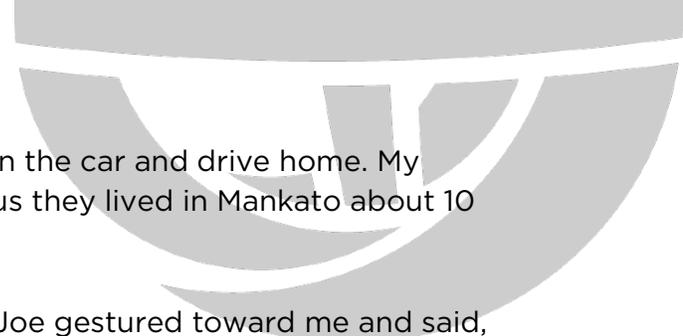


Are You a Sheep or a Goat?  
Pastor Jason Bryan-Wegner

**Matthew 25:31-46 NRSV**

<sup>31</sup>“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. <sup>32</sup>All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, <sup>33</sup>and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. <sup>34</sup>Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; <sup>35</sup>for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, <sup>36</sup>I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ <sup>37</sup>Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? <sup>38</sup>And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? <sup>39</sup>And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ <sup>40</sup>And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ <sup>41</sup>Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; <sup>42</sup>for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, <sup>43</sup>I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ <sup>44</sup>Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ <sup>45</sup>Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ <sup>46</sup>And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

I grew up in the small town of St. Peter, MN. And, like most small towns in America, there wasn't much to do at night other than “cruise the main drag” or bug our friends who were working late at fast food places or gas stations. One Friday night, my friend Joe and I stopped by the local gas station where another friend was working. We hadn't been there long when we noticed that a car had been pulled over outside and a few minutes later two people walked in, with the officer following not far behind. They were noticeably drunk and explained that they had no way to get home because one of them had already had their license suspended for a DWI and the other one was over the legal limit to drive and had just been given a citation. The



officer followed them to make sure they didn't get in the car and drive home. My friend asked them, "Where do you live?" They told us they lived in Mankato about 10 miles away.

Without consulting me and without any hesitation, Joe gestured toward me and said, "We'll give you a ride home. I'll take the guy, and he (meaning me) can follow behind with your car and your girlfriend."

Let's just say I was not nearly as excited about helping this inebriated couple out of a jam as my friend Joe. Wild thoughts filled my head. What if they rob us? What if this is a hoax and they kidnap us? What if they're serial killers?

None of these questions seemed to enter Joe's mind. So, what was I to do?

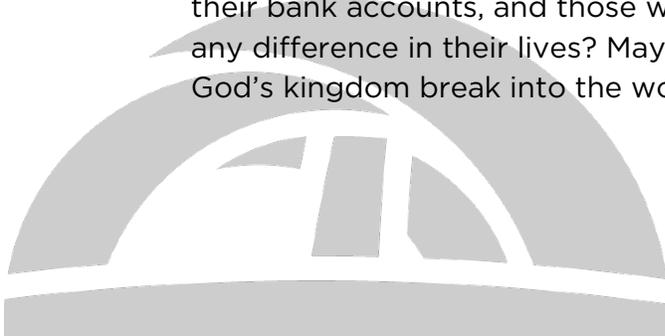
We got in the respective cars and headed down the highway toward Mankato just before midnight. The woman and I exchanged very few words, which made that 15-minute trip feel like an eternity. In the end, we pulled up to a little house just outside of downtown. The couple thanked us for our kindness and willingness to go out of our way and said goodnight. We didn't get robbed or kidnapped. And it turned out they weren't murderers.

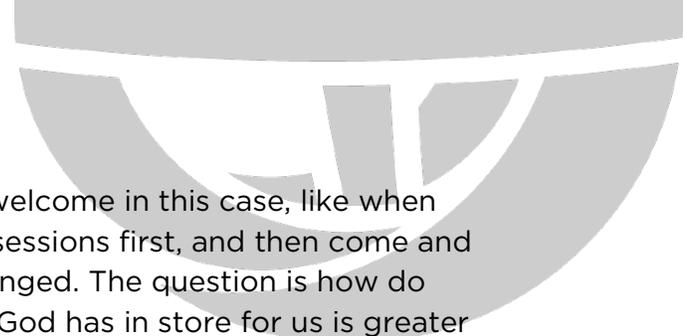
Did my friend Joe's unbridled willingness to help this couple out make him a sheep and me, with my fears and hesitancy make me a goat? Maybe.

Did either of us see the face of Jesus in that couple that night? I sure didn't. And I'm pretty sure that my lapsed Catholic friend Joe wasn't looking for Jesus that night either.

Did our unawareness make Jesus any less present that night? Absolutely not. What we both missed was an opportunity to experience a subtle, yet holy moment as the kingdom of heaven broke in to our world at a time we least expected it.

Throughout Matthew 25, Jesus calls his disciples, then and now, to be on high alert for the kingdom's coming. How do we do that? God expects that we will work for God's purposes of justice and mercy even when it doesn't seem God is around. God expects us to love fiercely those who the world turns its back. Yes, the physically hungry, the thirsty, the sick, and imprisoned. But what about those whom Jesus mentions in the Beatitudes: the poor in spirit, who struggle to see hope or who's faith has them in bondage to white supremacy, misogyny or hate? What about those whose god is the corporate ladder and those who seek their security solely through their bank accounts, and those who never expect that God's kingdom could make any difference in their lives? Maybe it would be just as surprising, if not more, to see God's kingdom break into the world here as well.





The kingdom may be met more with hostility than welcome in this case, like when Jesus told the the rich young man to sell all his possessions first, and then come and follow him. We can't encounter God and not be changed. The question is how do respond? Are we attentive and trust that whatever God has in store for us is greater than what we could experience without God? Or are we dismissive or resentful of the ways God chooses to come into the world?

Wherever and whenever the kingdom comes, Jesus makes it clear that we will be held accountable for how we spend our time and how we treat the least among us, physically and spiritually.

That is why it's important to focus our attention on where Jesus says he shows up and not put our stock in whether we or anyone else is a sheep or a goat. These games of division are sure to lead to disappointment because we all end up as goats. It's impossible to see Jesus in the face of the hungry and hurting, the lonely and imprisoned if all we do is measure ourselves against others or expect God to show up when it's convenient for us. We don't stand a chance of encountering God's kingdom of grace and mercy, of freedom and forgiveness, if we don't offer it freely to those among us who need it most. Pastor Fritz Wendt says it this way, "Where love is inhibited, spiritual death soon follows."

It would be easy to start pointing fingers at all the ways love is being inhibited and spiritual death appears present in today's world. All that would get us is another game of Sheep or Goats. What Jesus seeks from us is love. A love for God and love for the least. This love opens us to be transformed by the power of God's kingdom, and allows us to live in relationship with God in ways that make us and the world more spiritually alive.

There's an irony here though. This parable is the last of Jesus' teaching in Matthew before his betrayal, trial, and crucifixion. If the world would trust that the kingdom was coming through Jesus' teachings alone none of what follows might happen. But it seems that the goats win. Try as we may as individuals to love God's kingdom into being, we cannot do it. No one will come to Jesus' aid.

Instead, Jesus, our Lord, who took on flesh to live and love among us became the naked, the thirsty, the stranger, and the prisoner. When the world could not see God in the face of the least, he became the least. He went to the cross to reveal God's love for the whole world. Sheep, goats, and all. The only thing we can do in response to his great love is give witness through our love that Jesus meets us in weakness and death and transforms even death into life.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

