

Ezekiel 34: 11-16, 20-24; Matthew 25: 31-46
All in the Family

The Hebrew Prophet Ezekiel offered this vivid image of God as the determined and relentlessly caring Shepherd of Israel, just when the prophet received the news that Jerusalem had fallen to a foreign power. In the ancient Near East, “shepherd” was used as a name for the king who was a servant of the Deity and was supposed to take care of the people and rule with justice on God’s behalf.

But Ezekiel saw that the shepherds of Israel, whoever were ruling over them, had failed the people of Israel. Now God steps in to take over as the Shepherd, and we see how “God the Shepherd” rules; by seeking the lost, bringing back the strayed, binding up the injured, strengthening the weak.... In short, by taking care of the least of them sheep. And the Shepherd also “takes care of” the bully sheep that torment the little ones, by feeding them justice, for that’s what they need. This God the Shepherd, who feeds everyone justice, is the God whom Jesus calls Father, and through him we are the children of this God. That’s the image of the “King” the prophet wants us to remember, as we live in the world where our “Kings,” rule with a different set of rules. We have heard it said, “the measure of a society is how it treats its weakest members.”

At the end of the passage, we learn that God gives the role of Shepherd back to a king of God’s own choosing, in the lineage of David, and entrusts him to be the shepherd of God’s people.

And Matthew begins his Gospel by introducing Jesus as the Son of David. Over the past year, we have followed Jesus and his disciples through the Scriptures, with the gospel writer Matthew as our guide. Matthew has shown us the Jesus who is steeped in his Jewish tradition and Scriptures, considered himself a prophet, and taught us what a life of obedience to the God-given Law of Moses looked like, not only with his sermons and parables but also by living it himself and showing himself to be the walking Love of God for the world.

Along the way, Jesus in Matthew also pointed out to us what a life that had turned away from the Spirit of God’s law looked like, by engaging with those who opposed him and revealing their hypocrisy. We even picked up Matthew’s favorite expression, “weeping and gnashing of teeth,” to make a point clear.

It seems that Jesus is always pointing out to us “do this, and not that,” and “be like this, but not like that,” to teach us what it is to do God’s will. There seems to be a clear difference between the way of life that is after God’s heart and the way of life that breaks God’s heart. And if we are not careful, we are quick to carry that sense of clarity between what is of God and what is not, into our own final judgment of others as well as ourselves.

The Gospel text for this last Sunday of the church year is a vision of the day when all the nations are gathered before Christ, as a king and a shepherd and the judge. It is the Day of the Lord, the Day of Judgment, and the message on the surface may seem clear enough, but there are details that invite us to deeper reflections and deeper noticing about the judgment, about the Judge and ourselves. Hear now the Gospel according to Matthew, chap. 25: 31-46.

31 ‘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. 32All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, 33and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. 34Then 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; 35for 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, 36I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” 37Then 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? 38And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” 40And 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.” 41Then 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; 42for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43I 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.” 44Then 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?” 45Then 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.” 46And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.’

On that day, all the nations are gathered, because Christ is the King of the universe, the Lord of all nations, not because each nation is to be judged as a collective body. God does not judge us by our nationality, culture, or language; being a citizen of a certain country does not relieve us of moral responsibilities nor does it predestine us to the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. I may sound silly for stating the obvious, but it is quite amazing how quickly we do start to think in those terms in times of international tension and conflict.

Rather, the shepherd looks upon individual sheep and goats and separates them. People are judged for their own action or inaction. This is a hopeful reminder that even when we feel overwhelmed because the challenge we face seems too big for any one person to solve, there is action we can take as an individual and we need not be paralyzed by the bigness of the challenge, and that individual action, however small, is meaningful. Even when the whole country seems to be headed down a wrong path under the rule of a false King, being led by a false shepherd, I know who my Shepherd is and can follow her voice.

Then, the sheep are “blessed” because they 1) fed the hungry, 2) gave drink to the thirsty, 3) welcomed a stranger, 4) clothed those without clothes, 5) cared for the sick, and 6) visited the prisoner. The first 5 actions were typical Jewish works of mercy. Among all the nations and all cultures and traditions, those who are genuinely moved to show mercy and act in kindness are to inherit the kingdom. They did not act expecting any rewards.

But these are not just examples of merciful acts that make one kingdom-worthy and the kinds of the people we should be merciful towards. These also describe people, the hungry, the thirsty, the outcast, those without the basic protection, those living with illness, and those who are imprisoned.... They are the vulnerable ones whose lives are dependent on others, which are all of us, if we're honest. We might want to hide our vulnerability, our imperfection and our inadequacies, our lack...but God comes to us at our most vulnerable and defenseless state, and calls us members of God's household.

What vulnerability do you have and hide? I do not like to admit my neediness, my inadequacies, and my imperfection, my mistakes. Many of us who are in the “caring” or “helping” professions, our usual mode of operation is “I am okay, you are not okay, so let me help you.” Or maybe I should speak just for myself. I am clad in false pride because I am afraid people would find out I'm not always okay. I hide the shortcomings and weaknesses that I don't want to see.

I recently had an experience my inadequacy was laid to bare. While visiting Ghost Ranch for a week-long spiritual direction program, I was driving a narrow one lane country dirt road in the dark. They had just dug a ditch on both side of the road and topped it with loose gravel. My friend had told me I should replace my tires as they didn't have good traction. With headlights showing me only several feet ahead of me, I came to a place where the road curved to the right. Afraid of driving into the ditch to my right, I cut to the left but overcorrected and

ended up in the ditch to the left, which was shallow enough that my car went on and came to stop when it hit a juniper tree. The impact did not feel too bad and I was able to get back onto the road and drive on. I wasn't hurt at all, so when I arrived at the hermitage where I was staying, I went straight to bed. In the morning, I got up to warm up the car, as I was giving two of my spiritual teachers a ride to the dining hall. I came out to the car and was shocked to see the damage I had done to the front of my car; the hood was bent, the front grid was gone, and the driver's side lights as well as fenders were badly damaged. I was truly horrified... but for a different reason than what you might suspect. I was horrified not because of the damage to my car nor for the poor juniper tree, but for the fact that now there was no way I could "hide" this mess I had created and pretend as if nothing happened. I had to face my mistake that I couldn't hide.

The two teachers came out, ready to go to breakfast. When they saw my damaged car, their jaws dropped. The first thing they said was "oh, my goodness. Takako, are you okay?" When I told them what had happened and how shocked I still was, they immediately said "let's go back there." When we came to the "scene of the crime," my two teachers got off and immediately started to "search and rescue" the bits and pieces of my car... the front grid here, green pieces of fenders there... One of them said "oh, the juniper tree is still 'rooted. You didn't kill it" to comfort me. They were right there beside me, thoroughly empathizing with me and I felt so supported and comforted as I've never felt before. While I stood in shame, instead of interrogating what I could have done wrong, they simply held me in compassion and mercy. I felt redeemed.

Later that day, when we were saying goodbye, one of them squeezed a \$100 bill into my hand saying, "you took care of us all week and now I want you to use this towards your car." Then a few days later, a card with a check arrived in the mail from the other teacher, inquiring how I was doing. Their compassion broke open something deep within me; their lovingkindness expressed in the acts of mercy created a safe space where I could face my little, helpless, the most vulnerable me, breaking down the resistance to embrace that weak and fearful "little one" and see myself as the "least of them" and be truly grateful for belonging to the household of God.

As for the Judge and the King, the one who sits "on the throne of his glory" and has the power to separate the sheep from the goats is also the one who identifies with "the least of

these.” God’s willingness to identify with those who live dependent on others” show us we are both those who offer acts of mercy to the least, and we are also the least, the helpless, the lost, the ones the Christ remembers, cares about, and even died for. We are all in the family, together.

The Christ comes into this world in his glorious vulnerability, as an infant. May we see in his vulnerability the power and authority who rules our world and our hearts. Amen.