

Proper 29 A – Reign of Christ/World Food Day
November 20, 2011
Family of Christ Lutheran Church, Chanhassen, Minnesota
Pastor Kristie Hennig

Matthew 25:31-46

This story has never been a favorite of mine:
the impossible standards and rising expectations.
Jesus sorting and separating,
Jesus breathing eternal punishment.

Where is the gospel of grace –
the love we cannot earn, but which God gives us anyway in Christ?
Is Jesus saying, “Never mind. I was kidding about forgiveness.
The cross isn’t enough, either.
Good works *are* necessary.
In fact they’re the basis of salvation.
So, step it up!”

This vision of the Last Judgment stirs up my anxiety.
Without grace, I’m no more than a goat.
And in this scenario things don’t turn out well for the goats.

The story of the sheep and the goats makes me think of rush
at the Kappa House when I was in college –
when we “sisters” held the social futures of hundreds of freshmen
women in our tight little fists.
We waved the cutest girls on through
and rejected the bids of dozens of perfectly wonderful girls,
deeming them “unworthy” of membership in our highfalutin sorority.
What if one of *them* was Jesus?
I want be Jesus’ little lamb...
but maybe I was a goat in sheep’s clothing back then.
Maybe I still am. (!)
Is there any hope for me?



There's nothing like having to preach on a hard text to make you take a hard look at it.

There is an element of surprise in this story that I don't think I had ever noticed before.

And this is it:

Both the sheep and the goats are surprised by how Jesus recollects their actions.

Neither of them remembers the encounters that he remembers.

Neither the sheep nor the goats had any idea of what they were doing.

The sheep didn't think about whether this was Jesus

they were serving at The Gathering Place

or the one they were handing a cold beverage to on a hot day.

They didn't wonder if the stranger they were taking into their home,

or the one they were buying new shoes or medicine

or visiting in jail was Jesus.

And the goats didn't stop to wonder if the beggar they were calling a dirty hippie,

or the person they were denying health care,

or the father they were deporting

or the single mom they were ushering to the end of the line

might have been Jesus either.

Not something they thought about.

Now both the sheep and the goats have to ask,

“Lord, *when was it* that we saw you hungry...?”

The answer is the same:

“You know the lost, the last, the least, the little one who crossed your path?”

That was me,” says Jesus.
The sheep, who were abundance thinkers and lived compassion,
had reached out to those in need;
the goats, stuck in the mental muck of scarcity,
made excuses,
hoarded what they had,
and refused to share.

So maybe grace is the ticket after all:
Any acts of mercy we manage flow from the love that God has poured
into us.
“We love because God first loved us,” the Bible says.
We can’t take credit for our good works, in other words,
and they don’t justify us with God even if we could.

This story of the sheep and the goats, unique to Matthew’s gospel,
is meant to be inspiration for doing works of compassion and justice.
It’s really not about how we are saved for eternity.
Here are the ethical guidelines for living in the kingdom.
Among the beloved of the Lord are both sheep and goats,
living together in one herd,
sometimes getting it,
at other times not so much.
But the Shepherd’s love never wavers.
He just keeps hoping we’ll catch on eventually,
and live more and more into our sheepiness,
and be less goatish all around.

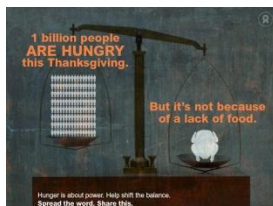
We could highlight and advocate for any of the basic human rights
that Jesus holds up in his story of the sheep and the goats.
But feeding the hungry is perhaps the most basic act of kindness,
and one that we have responded to with energy and compassion
here at FOC.
We’ll come back to that in a bit.

Hunger in our world ranges in severity from a situation of *food insecurity* (which a surprising number of people in our own county are experiencing these days) to *famine*, which is killing tens of thousands in the Horn of Africa.

The causes of food shortages include:
global economics,
climate change,
environmental degradation,
corruption,
prejudice,
political gridlock,
and the lack of communal will to guarantee this fundamental human right for every person on the planet.

Despite the successes of the Green Revolution of the 1970's – when scientists developed scores of innovative ways to boost food production from soil enrichment to hardier strains of rice and wheat to pest and disease control -- hunger in the 21st century is a crisis of catastrophic proportions.

Every 3.6 seconds someone in the world dies of hunger;
Every time we take a breath,
someone succumbs to the preventable, treatable condition of starvation.



And it's not because there isn't enough food being produced.
People are dying of hunger because we aren't sharing.

A letter written to TIME magazine reported recently that,

“If Americans ate 10% less meat,
those resources (grain and water) could feed 20 million people.
We could feed all 7 billion [who are hungry today] if we wanted to.”¹

“Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry...?”

When a body is malnourished,
medication doesn't work as it should.
Neither does your brain.
Without breakfast, it's hard to do your best at school
or be your best in a job interview.
Hunger doesn't only hurt the stomach; it hurts a person's dignity.
People who come to food shelves like Bountiful Basket and PROP,
and community meals –
like The Gathering Place in Chaska and Our Saviour's in Minneapolis
and Hope House in San Salvador –
wish to high heaven they didn't have to.
In a country of abundance,
it is shameful that so many -- 1 in 9 -- of our citizens is hungry.
Yet *they* are the ones who feel ashamed.

In recent years, life has gotten a good deal tougher for a lot more people.
As the local papers reported last week,
here in eastern Carver County,
which has one of the highest per capita income
of any county in the state,
the percentage of Chaska residents living in poverty has gone up from
4.7% in 2000 to 7.1% last year.
In Chanhassen, the poverty rate has grown in ten years from 1.9% to
4.1%.
Calls into the county social services, Love INC, and Bountiful Basket
have risen sharply.

¹ Inbox, Stella Herzig, *TIME*, November 14, 2011, 4.

People are hurting – some of our own are hurting –
and Jesus asks us to respond to the needs we see:
to feed the hungry,
give drink to the thirsty,
welcome the stranger,
clothe the naked,
care for the sick and visit prisoners...
as if he were the one standing in front of us, in need.
Because he is.

How are we doing as a congregation with the growing need around us?

If FOC were to close its doors, would we be missed in this community?
I think we would.



Bountiful Basket has received 1,837 pounds of food from us since July, when they moved into their temporary quarters after the CAP Agency closed its Chaska presence.
Only one church is giving more.



The Rainbow gift cards they're giving out will supply Thanksgiving turkeys for 300 families.
Funds for those gift cards came from Family of Christ.

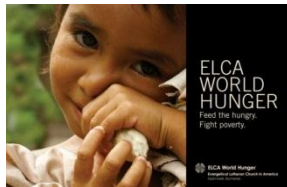
Teri Burns and children's ministry have cooked and served for The Gathering Place several times this year. The confirmation students are giving their offerings to 363, a sandwich ministry to the homeless of Minneapolis.

[Caring and Sharing Hands]

And Judy Prinz and Dawn Peterson and their crew make sandwiches for Sharing and Caring Hands every month.

The Lavens and Kayatis roasted turkeys for the Turkey Fiesta held yesterday at St. John's Lutheran Church in Shakopee for Hispanic neighbors.

Many of you pack life-saving food at Feed My Starving Children,



and as a congregation we give .5% of our income to ELCA World Hunger Appeal, an extremely cost-effective organization working in the areas of economic development, hunger relief, education, and advocacy.

Common Thread, the fellowship group for empty nesters, regularly serves at Our Saviour's shelter and packs food at FMSC.

An FOC Bible study group is collecting blankets and personal care items for homeless people...and getting the word out on Facebook.

Having been faithful in our serving the hungry, this may be the time for us to take our faith to the next level: *advocacy*, that is, working to change the systems in place that keep people in poverty,

and fashion creative solutions to put an end to hunger and homelessness. Because it isn't right that some of us have way more than we need and so many others don't have enough to survive.

In Latin America, they pray what they call the justice prayer:

*“Señor, dales pan a los que tienen hambre.
Y a los que tienen pan, dales hambre para la justicia.”*

Lord, to those who hunger, give bread.
And to those who have bread, give them hunger for justice.”



Matthew 25: 31-46 is about the choices we sheepy goats and goaty sheeps make every day. The One who speaks the words recorded by Matthew about the opportunities we are given is the One who, in choosing us, came to our world naked and helpless. He was hungry, he was cold -- from the very beginning, he was a homeless stranger in need of shelter, and at the last, a prisoner of human fear and greed. This Crucified and Risen One speaks to us from his throne, his eyes as kind as can be... “Come, you that are blessed...as I have loved you, now you go and love one another.” Amen.