

After college, I served as a youth pastor for six years. During that time, I took a group of ten students to Kansas City with me for a mission trip. We worked in a church there called Set Free, which was a church for the homeless run by former homeless persons. The church met in a huge old four-story church building they'd received as a donation, but which had been abandoned and empty for a long time before they took possession of it. The building was barely inhabitable.

Set Free mainly operated on the main level - where the sanctuary was - and the basement, where they prepared and served meals. The top three floors were largely unused. In fact, they warned us not to go to the top floor at all; we didn't listen, of course, so we climbed the stairwell from the main level up to the third. As we were beginning to climb to the fourth, I could see what looked like a thick, black stripe painted as a trim along the ceiling. As we got closer, the stripe started to move, and I realized it was a solid swarm of roaches.

Needless to say, we did *not* go up on the fourth floor.

Set Free asked us to paint and clean, and since we didn't know exactly what we'd be doing when we got there, our church just sent us with money to buy all the supplies we'd need when we got there - paint, brushes, cleaning supplies, etc. We arrived on a Saturday night, so Sunday would consist of worshiping at Set Free, serving breakfast to the homeless congregation and then a tour of their program. We'd assess the situation and buy supplies on Sunday, then spend the whole next week working.

Set Free put us on the second floor, and to say that our quarters were disgusting would be kind. We were sleeping on used mattresses on the floor, using bathrooms that hadn't been cleaned possibly since the 80s, and *everything* was dusty and unkempt. That first night, my students formulated all manner of plans for how they would clean this second floor where we were staying. They were making shopping lists and strategizing, figuring out how to make their stay in this building more tolerable.

I would guess that we all get their decision. There's an impulse we all have, when we get outside our comfort zone: to turn inward. To become defensive, protective. It's not a bad impulse: the desire to move away from harm. It's the equivalent of a flinch away from a hit. Most of us tend to lean away from the uncomfortable, the unknown. And that includes people who're different from us. Just like the youth I took to Set Free, when we get into those places, we tend to think about ourselves first.

The problem is that while flinching away from a punch is a good way to avoid getting hit in the face, once you leave the realm of a fist-fight, it gets increasingly less healthy for us to avoid uncomfortable situations. And when it comes to *people* who are different from us, when we avoid them, we miss God.

Sounds crazy right? To claim that if we don't engage those who're different than we are, people who make us uncomfortable, we miss God? How can it be that God is with people not like us?

Especially when we're in Church right now. If God is anywhere, it's here, with us.

But that's not what Jesus tells us in the parable we're looking at today. If you have your bibles, turn to Matthew 25 with me. If you grabbed one of the bibles off the rack on the way in, this

scripture is on page XXX. And if you don't own a bible, we'd love for you to take that with you, to keep as a gift from us. Throughout the summer, we've been exploring the various parables Jesus told about God's Kingdom. The parables are short, provocative stories that don't necessarily have clear, obvious interpretations. Jesus told them as a way to invite us to consider carefully the character and nature of the new life he came to announce. During July, we've been looking at stories about what the End will look like, and how that means we should be living now as we wait for that End.

So the parable we're exploring is the final story in a series of stories Jesus is telling specifically about the End. This is a story about how we're to wait well, how we're to live for the kingdom while we wait for our King.

Okay, let's listen to Jesus' story in Matthew 25, beginning in verse 31:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit upon his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered in his presence, and he will separate the people as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will place the sheep at his right hand and the goats at his left.

Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world. For I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home. I was naked, and you gave me clothing. I was sick, and you cared for me. I was in prison, and you visited me.'

Then these righteous ones will reply, 'Lord, when did we ever see you hungry and feed you? Or thirsty and give you something to drink? Or a stranger and show you hospitality? Or naked and give you clothing? When did we ever see you sick or in prison and visit you?' And the King will say, 'I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters,\* you were doing it to me!'

Then the King will turn to those on the left and say, 'Away with you, you cursed ones, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his demons. For I was hungry, and you didn't feed me. I was thirsty, and you didn't give me a drink. I was a stranger, and you didn't invite me into your home. I was naked, and you didn't give me clothing. I was sick and in prison, and you didn't visit me.'

Then they will reply, 'Lord, when did we ever see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and not help you?' And he will answer, 'I tell you the truth, when you refused to help the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were refusing to help me.' And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous will go into eternal life.

This can easily be read as a terrifying picture of eternal life: Jesus comes back and immediately separates the good from the bad. The good get good and the bad get bad. So you immediately want to know: am I a sheep or a goat? Which way am I going? But parables always invite us to sit with them a while, so let's work through this story again, and pay attention to a couple of unusual features that give us a clue to Jesus' invitation here:

First, it's telling that neither the sheep nor the goats knew the sheep had it right and the goats had it wrong. This ought to give all of us pause: it's not like the sheep were holding out on the goats, as though when they were separated the sheep got to say, Well, I told you so! You didn't listen and now you're sorry!

The sheep were as surprised as the goats. And we'll talk more about *why* they're surprised in a moment, but first let's talk about why Jesus is telling a story in which they're both surprised: Jesus doesn't want *us* to be surprised. This is like a sneak preview. He's letting us in on what the End will look like so we can be prepared. Just like the story of the 10 bridesmaids from two weeks ago, just like the return of the master in the parable of the talents last week: when we know what the End is going to look like, we can be prepared. Jesus is inviting us to become sheep.

We *think* this is about how to be safe *then*. It feels like a story about what happens next. But it's clearly not. Jesus is obviously telling us how we should live *now*. This story is an invitation to join in Jesus' life right now. So how do we join in? What should today look like?

As with many of Jesus' stories, he's building off a story they already know. In this case, he's referring back to a vision God gave the prophet Ezekiel. In chapter 34 of his book, Ezekiel sees God separating sheep - good and bad. The bad sheep are those who - much like the goats in Jesus' story - don't care for the poor. In fact, Ezekiel's bad sheep go even further, exploiting and oppressing the poor.

So Jesus' listeners wouldn't have been surprised that Jesus used Ezekiel's vision, but they would've taken note that he changed it from merely separating sheep to separating sheep from goats. In Jesus' agrarian culture, this would've been a familiar image: shepherds grazed sheep and goats together (because why not?). They only separated them when it was time to shear the sheep. You don't shear goats, but we use wool for all kinds of stuff.

So here, at the End, Jesus separates sheep from goats. And it's no coincidence that the sheep are the persons who give themselves to those around them. And the goats don't. That's an image anyone in Jesus' culture would've understood intuitively: sheep give more than goats. Sheep give of themselves. (granted, not exactly willingly - it's not like they shear themselves and bring us the wool, but relax. It's a metaphor.)

Jesus tells this scary, shocking story and he says, at the End, when it's all said and done, what makes the difference between life and death is whether you're a giver. Whether your life is characterized by generosity or not. Whether or not you engaged the people around you who usually get overlooked.

So what's easy to do here is turn this parable into a new law: you say, Oh, so the key is doing good things for people. I thought the key was believing Jesus is God, but according to this parable it's helping people. So if I want to get into Heaven, I just have to start doing good stuff for people. So you make a commitment to help at Target: Dayton every month and donate stuff to GoodWill and give money to the Red Cross when there are disasters and maybe you go on a trip to Africa once or twice and...

You can see the problem. You're still treating Jesus' new life as a quota you have to meet. It's just a different kind of legalism than before. Now, instead of having all the right beliefs it's doing all the

right actions. You're still trying and earning and hoping that you've *done* enough at the end of the day to be a sheep, not a goat.

That's why it's important to remember the sheep didn't realize they were in. They weren't *trying* to earn anything. And it also seems that the goats thought they were in too. They're as surprised as anyone to find they're out. They apparently believed all the right things - they call Jesus "Lord" in the parable. They clearly believe at an intellectual level he's is God.

According to Jesus, the End isn't a theological final exam. Jesus didn't compare a smart animal and a dumb animal (sheep, in fact, are notoriously dumb). He could've said, I'm going to divide the border collies from the sheep. Made it about who knows the right answers, who has made an intellectual assent to Christianity. He doesn't say, you believe I'm God and you don't, so you're in and you're out.

In other words: you can believe all the right things and have it all wrong. Because Jesus' new life isn't just about agreeing with a set of propositions. It's a whole new life. As in every aspect of your person.

And that's the key to this parable: being prepared for the End isn't about believing all the right things *or* about doing all the right things. It's about becoming the right person.

The reason the sheep are welcomed into eternal life then is because they're participating in eternal life now. They look like Jesus now. They are generous, kind, welcoming, sacrificial. The great theologian Thomas Aquinas calls what they do here - feeding the hungry, visiting the prisoner, clothing the naked - acts of mercy. They are acts that imitate God.

And more than that, they discover God is right in the middle of those awkward uncomfortable acts of mercy. Jesus claims that he's present in those moments - as present as when he is in these worship spaces, when we take communion, when we read Scripture or pray. These acts of mercy form us, they mold us into the image of Jesus because we participate with Jesus where he's already working.

What makes the sheep sheep is that they have become the kinds of persons who imitate Jesus naturally. So much so that when he points it out to them, they don't even realize it. Acts of mercy have become as natural for them as breathing.

The goats on the other hand don't. They've given intellectual assent to Jesus, but they don't actually look like him.

And that's the heart of the issue: Eternal Life isn't something that happens *then*. It's something that happens *now*. The question this parable begs us to ask is, Am I participating right now in the new thing God is doing? Am I allowing the Spirit to form me into a person who looks like Jesus or not? Am I joining finding God among those who aren't like me, risking, stepping out of my comfort zone to give to those who aren't like me.

That first night at Set Free, my youth could only think about themselves, what they could do to make their own stays better. But the next day, we worshiped with about 300 homeless persons. And then we cooked and served them a meal in a kitchen every bit as dirty as our rooms. And

then we got a tour of their facilities, saw the giant piles of unsorted clothing they couldn't distribute because they didn't know what they had.

By that afternoon, when we sat down to discuss what we'd do, my students had a new plan: with no prompting from me or my adult leaders, these suburban middle- and high school students said, We want to spend our time working down here in the kitchen and sorting the clothes. We want to paint the hall where they eat, replace all the burnt-out light bulbs and clean and paint the bathrooms they use down here.

I was surprised, so I asked about their rooms. Didn't they want to clean up where they were staying, maybe spend even one day making it a little bit more habitable?

They said, No. We're only going to be here for a week. We can endure that for a week if it means we get to use our time making this feel a bit more like home for those who don't have a home.

Not a single student disagreed. And all that week, they slept in filth so they could work to bring a bit of beauty into an ugly world. The work we did that week was truly gross. But they went about it with smiles on their faces (and the occasional grimace) because all they could think about was how good it would make the Set Free community feel.

To say I was overwhelmed would be an understatement. I wish I could take some credit for their maturity, for how much they looked like Jesus. But I didn't even try to convince them. They came to a place of brokenness, they went way outside their comfort zones, and they found Jesus among those people. And without a second thought, they gave of themselves. They sacrificed and gave of themselves.

I've been in a lot of worship gatherings like this. I've read a lot of Scripture and prayed a lot of prayers. And I can tell you I've never felt the Kingdom of God closer to me than when those ten teenagers declared in one voice, We are happy to sleep in filth if it means we can serve these people.

*That* is eternal life. That is heaven coming to Earth. That is what it looks like to be a sheep, not a goat. Those ten teens, in that moment, for that week, were the very image of God to everyone who met them. And after they left, when the homeless population returned, they were amazed at the transformation in those first two levels of the building. And the staff was happy to tell them about ten teens who gave up a week of their summer break to take all that filth upon themselves for no other reason than because they cared about these people they barely knew.

Who would you rather be like? The college guy who lies about playing football? Or those teens who gave of themselves to create a bit of beauty in the midst of ugliness?

You don't have to go on a mission trip to do that (though you can). We live in a world where people are lonely, depressed, hopeless. Every day you have the opportunity to serve those people, to offer them tiny bits of hope, tiny glimpses of God's Kingdom, Jesus' new life, breaking into their ordinary, every day world.

*That* is eternal life. Not then, but now. Now in the every day. Jesus invites you to become a sheep, to become a person who looks like him, who gives of yourself because you know that the very act

of giving makes you look more like Jesus. And each of those small acts makes you more and more like Jesus until, like those sheep, it's just a natural part of who you are. You don't even think about it. Because you've become like Jesus.

But it has to start somewhere. So why not today? Why not now? Like we talked about last week: risk. Step out of your comfort zone. Find those people you don't usually give a second thought to. Give to them.

So today, what will you choose? Will you choose to look more like Jesus? Or choose just to talk about it?

### **Communion SetUp**