

Augustana College
Chapel of Reconciliation

The Sheep Sermon

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So what are you -- a sheep or a goat? That's often how we respond to this parable, as an ethics lesson. Sheepness is good; goatness is bad. If you want to be a good sheep, if you want to stand on Jesus' right hand, if you want to go to eternal life then you better get your sheep on, get your sheep in gear and take care of Jesus by taking care of "the least of these." Jesus will reward you in the end.

For some reason, every time I hear this parable a vision pops into my head. Not a "John had a revelation on the island of Patmos" kind of vision but a picture in my mind of how that last judgment is going to look. After the resurrection of the dead, all of humanity is gathered before Jesus' throne. First we sing a few billion rousing choruses of "A Mighty Fortress is Our God." (hey, it's my vision so I get to pick the hymns!) Then it's judgment time. One at a time we parade before Jesus, some moving to the left, others moving to the right. When it's my turn, I approach Jesus and, in the same way he's done with everyone else, he opens his arms to me, smiles and says, "Welcome to my feast. It's a happenin' party. Go on in and join my friends." Then he points to his right. And when I look in the direction he's pointing, to my surprise I see gathered around the table all of the people that I had thought were goats and all the people I considered "least" in my world. People I never thought would stand at the right hand of Christ or truly make it as a sheep in God's kingdom. And I look back at Jesus in shock and have to decide: do I trust in Jesus that he knows what he's doing and accept the invitation to join the feast? Or do I turn away, weeping and gnashing my teeth in anger that somehow Jesus has gotten his judgment all wrong?

I recognize that there are problems with my vision as it relates to Jesus' parable. One problem is that this vision is "all about me." My vision, my perspective, my judgments, my decisions and choices. My hymns, my sheep, my goats. But when we read the parable carefully we quickly realize that in this last judgment scene, it's not all about us; it's all about Jesus. Will you do something for me? Everybody raise your left hand and then point it to the left. Now look at me and note the direction I'm pointing. We're pointing in different directions, aren't we? That's the way it is in this parable. When we judge people from our own perspectives we'll get it wrong every time; we'll always be pointing in a different direction than Jesus is. It seems, then, the last judgment isn't about me at all. It's all about Jesus and the direction he chooses to point. My only role in this story is to follow where Jesus points.

But there's another problem with my vision. And again the problem is that it's all about me. Me, myself, and I. Me, the individual, independent, self-centered I who stands before Jesus alone and lets all those other me's stand on their own as well. But this is NOT what the text says. This parable is very clear that Jesus isn't judging individuals here; he's judging nations. Groups of people -- communities, cities, states, countries, global populations. I stand before Jesus not as a me, but as a we. And Jesus is speaking not to a singular you/ewe (pun intended) but to a plural you, a y'all as my Greek teacher from the South used to say, all you ewes. In other words, these sheep and goats are not standing before Jesus as individuals. We stand before him as a flock...a flock of sheep and herd of goats.

Being a city girl and not knowing much about the difference between sheep and goats, I decided to do a little research. And I found this great website for 4-H'ers called "Sheep101.com" that gave me some helpful insight on what makes sheep different from goats and why Jesus might have chosen these particular animals – rather than say cats and dogs -- to make his point. The first thing I learned was that despite the fact that goats are a completely different genus and

species than sheep, often it's very difficult to tell them apart. I guess one way to tell is that goats' tails point up while sheep tails hang down; another is that goats say "maa" while sheep say "baa."

Also, their behavior is different. Goats are curious, independent animals who don't need other goats around to be content or feel safe. Some species of goats are even known to run wild. Goats are "pull one's self up by your own bootstraps" kinds of creatures who know when to seek shelter on their own without any help thank you very much. They are agile and can get up on their hind feet to get the best food for themselves. And it probably never even occurs to goats to help out other goats (except maybe their baby goats) because if you're going to be a goat, you should be able to take care of yourself.

Sheep on the other hand have been considered rather stupid creatures...although what we humans consider stupid might actually be rather smart for a sheep. Sheep are social animals and groups of sheep are called flocks for a reason. Sheep like to stay together and within eyesight of each other and if a sheep gets separated from the flock, both the individual sheep and the flock become agitated. Sheep tend to follow each other blindly, even off of cliffs if they get behind the wrong leader. And sheep protect each other from predators by gathering around each other and caring for the outliers in the group. I actually saw this in action when I was visiting Harding County for my interview to be a pastor. We were driving through the backcountry to one of the churches I was going to serve when we came upon a single sheep standing in the middle of the road. There were two sheep standing on the right side of the road and a thousand sheep standing on the left side of the road. Needing to get to the church in a hurry, the driver of the car beeped the horn at the sheep on the road, thinking it would just move off to the left and join its fellow sheep. But instead, all one thousand sheep on the left side panicked as a unit and began to run across the road to get to the other side. We had to wait for 20 minutes until all the sheep had

crossed the road before we could move on. I used to use this example to describe the stupidity of sheep but now I'm not so sure. Now I wonder if perhaps these sheep were simply following their natural, God-given instinct to protect the least of these in their midst from the predator-automobile by swooping around the "lost" sheep and moving them away from danger.

I think Jesus knew enough about sheep and goats to see these distinctions and it's possible that he is using them here to describe a reality. The independent, stubborn, self-centered, pull-em-up-by-their-own-bootstrap goats won't think they need anybody else, including Jesus, and thus won't even notice when others need them. And even if they do notice, they won't bother to help the least because it's obvious the least just aren't trying hard enough and goats should be able to save themselves. Of course, in the end, all this goat-centeredness will cause these goats great suffering as they leave Jesus behind to make a go of it on their own.

The sheep, on the other hand, will instinctively protect the least of these, giving the hungry food, the thirsty water, the sick health care, the stranger immigrant welcome, the naked clothing, the prisoner humanity...not because they're trying to earn their way to heaven, or prove their own sheepness, or please Jesus. But because they are sheep who through the grace of God follow their shepherd into a new life where all are cared for, sheep who are simply being sheep and don't even know they are doing it...baa, baa, baa!

So what does this parable say to us today? Well, as an ethicist, I believe that this parable tells us that we need to remember the least of these among us. We need to feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, provide health care for the sick, welcome the strangers among us (legal or illegal), give clothing to the naked, and give the prisoner humanity through our visits. This is the call from our shepherd and we need take the risk, join the flock and just do it.

But as a proclaimer of the gospel, I say unto you this: I have good news for you. You **get** to stop worrying about your own sheepness or goatness. You **get** to stop trying to earn your sheep patch or prove you've earned it. Instead, you **get** to care for your neighbor and you **get** to join the feast. For Jesus, in his life, death, and resurrection has said to you loud and clear: "Welcome! You have inherited the abundance of my life. The bread is broken for you. The wine has been poured for you. My forgiveness is given for you. My love is shared with you and through me your love is shared with others. Goodness and mercy **will** follow you all of your life, for you are my sheep and I am your shepherd. I know your name and have laid down my life for you. Welcome! The meal is ready."

And now let all Christ's sheep say together...Amen!...Baa, Baa, Baa!

CAMPUS MINISTRY ANNOUNCEMENTS

Campus Pastor Candidates - For the next two Mondays, there will be a campus pastor candidate preaching in chapel at 10 am. Students are encouraged to stay for a few minutes after chapel to chat with the candidates. Your input would be greatly appreciated and can be sent to Emily Weber or Pr. Paul at the chapel or to Jane Kuper in the Human Resources department.

“World Hunger and Poverty” is designated as the International Theme Year for 2011-2012. Minigrants up to \$500 are available to help students and organizations develop programming [speakers, workshops, events] that promote learning in this theme. For information, see <http://special.augie.edu/~asa/mini-grant/> Applications are to be submitted to ASA president Jake Bury.

Walk the Camino deSantiago in Northern Spain over spring break, 2012. The camino is one of the oldest pilgrimage routes in the world. The course will explore the practice of pilgrimage today and through the ages as we walk 120 KM culminating in Santiago. Questions, see Pr. Paul or Sam Ogdie.

CHAPEL SCHEDULE

Fri. (18th) Morning Worship, 10 am - Tyler Maybee, Sr. Spkr.
Sun. (20th) Morning Worship, 11 am - Tom Gehring, ‘15
Mon. (21st) Morning Worship, Campus Pastor Candidate - Lisa Goforth

THANKSGIVING BREAK - 23rd - 27th (no chapel)

Sun. (27th) Chapel Decorating and Wreath-Making Party, 8 pm