***THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO SHEEP AND GOATS***

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Texts: Ezekiel 34:11-24 and Matthew 25:31-46

In my email last week an ad popped up for a new publication: *The Gospel According to Star Wars*, 2nd edition. Any of you who have read *The Gospel According to Star Wars, 1st* edition know that it looks at theological themes not so subtly hidden in the original *Star Wars* trilogy (not to be confused with a *Star Wars* Trinity) – themes like redemption, death and resurrection, and the power of the Holy Spirit flowing through all of life. Across the years there have been a host of such *Gospel According To…* publications that have looked at the intersection of faith and culture. In 1965 Robert Short’s book, *The Gospel According to Peanuts*, became a best-seller as it looked at the Christian life through the lens of Charles Schulz’s much-loved comic strip. In one memorable comic Lucy is jumping rope and says to Linus,

“**YOU** A DOCTOR! **HA!** THAT’S A BIG LAUGH!

YOU COULD NEVER BE A DOCTOR! YOU KNOW WHY?

BECAUSE YOU DON’T LOVE MANKIND, THAT’S WHY!”

As Lucy goes skipping off Linus responds with a shout,

“**I** LOVE MANKIND…IT’S **PEOPLE** I CAN’T STAND!!”[[1]](#endnote-1)

Intentionally or not, Schulz identified the challenge for us as Christians to love, not just hypothetical neighbors, but the particular neighbor we know who has a face and a name. Such theological themes have been traced more recently in books like *The Gospel According to the Simpsons*, *The Gospel According to Dr. Seuss*, *The Gospel According to Harry Potter*, and *The Gospel According to the Walking Dead*. Truth be known, many books and movies draw on theological themes overtly or covertly to make their point, and conversely, through the eyes of faith we recognize holy fingerprints in the everyday and imaginative stories of life and death.

In our Bibles each of the four Gospels is titled by its author. In Greek they read simply: *According to Matthew, According to Mark, According to Luke,* and *According to John*. What makes them Gospel for us is not the title in the text but the substance of the text – the good news of Jesus Christ as each Gospel writer describes it. Gospel is literally “good news”, though in contemporary culture it has taken on a definition more closely akin to “truth” – some folks even use that expression, *gospel truth*. *The Gospels According To*… books explore the fragments of truth for Christian faith and life through well-loved books or movies.

Along that line, the familiar story of the day of judgment that we heard Jesus tell the disciples in Matthew’s Gospel might be entitled *The Gospel According to Sheep and Goats*. It is a story told by Jesus to describe something of the Kingdom of Heaven; the story reveals truth that comes out of two very different perspectives on life and living – that of the sheep and that of the goats. For some strange reason, the sheep are always the good guys in Scripture and the goats are the villains. Some commentators have suggested this is because sheep have more commercial value; maybe, but that is not the reason given in the text. There is no reason given in the text, just a favored place for the sheep in God’s flock:

* In the familiar words of the 100th Psalm, we are “the sheep of God’s pasture,” not “the goats of God’s fields.”
* In the passage from Ezekiel we heard this morning, the Lord God says, “I myself will search for my sheep.” And Jesus tells a parable about searching for one lost sheep, but who is searching for the goats?
* The best sacrifice under the Law is an unblemished sheep; if you have no such sheep then an unblemished goat will do, though it is kind of like settling for a Twinkie because you have no homemade pumpkin pie for your Thanksgiving dessert.
* It is not the “Kid of God” who takes away the sins of the world; it is the “Lamb of God.”
* We don’t talk about someone being a scapesheep, he’s a scapegoat.
* If you have trouble falling asleep, you don’t count goats; you count sheep.
* When the pastor who had been invited for Sunday dinner arrived and asked the little boy what they were having for dinner, the lad replied, “Goat.” “Goat?” said the pastor. “Yeah,” said the boy, “I heard my mom say, ‘Well, since we’ve got the old goat for dinner we might as well get out the good plates.’”

The goats young and old get a bad rap through no fault of their own, as far as we can tell, while the sheep get the glory. So, when Jesus speaks of the Son of Man coming to separate the sheep and the goats, we already know which side we want to be on. Nobody wants to be a goat! The question is: what separates the sheep from the goats?

*The Gospel According to Sheep* suggests that your life ought to reflect love for God and neighbor. Those whom the Son of Man claims as sheep live the way God wants us to live; they feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, shelter the homeless, heal the sick, and visit the prisoner. They serve the needs of others day in and day out. If the Parable of the Talented Servants that we heard last week is about using your God-given talents to the utmost of your abilities for God’s good purposes, then *The Gospel According to Sheep* identifies what those good purposes are: meeting the needs of your neighbors in need! There are echoes of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount here:

*Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.*

*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,*

*for they will be filled.*

The Good Samaritan lived by the Gospel According to Sheep and so too did St. Francis of Assisi, Mother Teresa and a host of folks across the ages whose lives reflect love for neighbors in need, regardless of who the neighbor was or what the need might be. They loved humankind, but they loved people too, to paraphrase Linus.

*The Gospel According to Sheep* says that is how you should live; you love people in the simple things of life, day to day. There are no grand and glorious feats of faith here; there are just simple acts of kindness done to meet the needs of neighbors – the kinds of things even we might do. It is life according to that Gospel that is commended by the Son of Man as he sorts the sheep and the goats – life that is lived in service to others, for in so doing we serve Christ. Those who live by *The Gospel According to Sheep* are generally clueless about the impact of their actions. When the king commends them for their acts of compassion they don’t pat themselves on the back; they ask, “When?” When did we see you hungry and give you food, or thirsty and give you a drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you or naked and give you clothing or in prison and visit you? The righteous sheep are not just those who do the right thing, for as T. S. Eliot reminds us:

*The last temptation is the greatest treason:*

*To do the right deed for the wrong reason.*[[2]](#endnote-2)

The righteous are those who do the right thing for the right reason – out of love for a neighbor, out of compassion for those in need. They aren’t trying to score points with God or impress their neighbors; they are simply trying to live faithfully day by day as Jesus showed them and urged all his disciples to do. Living by *The Gospel According to Sheep* is a blessing to those in need but also to God and to those who serve, for they inherit the kingdom!

Jesus does not stop with commending those who live by that Gospel; he also chastises those who live by *The Gospel According to Goats*. We get a hint of what their Gospel is about in the passage we read from Ezekiel; like the fat sheep in that parable, they live for themselves. They take what they want without regard to the needs of others. “When you feed in good pastures must you tread down the pasture for others?” asks the Lord. When you drink clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet?” It is hard to read those words without thinking of the mining companies that take the ore and leave behind tainted waters, ravaged land, and miners with black lung disease. It is hard not to think of the utilities that dump coal ash into streams or the factories who create toxic waste sites or the cities like Flint, MI where lead pipes contaminate the drinking water. It is hard not to think of the people who drain swamps to develop more real estate at the risk of more damaging floods and those who tap the aquifer to water lawns or golf courses in the midst of droughts. It is hard not to think of all of us who Ezekiel indicts for fouling the streams and waters and air for selfish gain without regard to the impact on others. *The Gospel According to Goats* says, “God helps them that help themselves.” *The Gospel According to Goats* says, “Put yourself first.”

But as Jesus makes clear in his story, it is not just what the goats do, but what they fail to do, that makes them unrighteous at the Last Judgment. They fail to love or serve those in need in their midst. They do NOT feed the hungry or give drink to the thirsty or shelter the homeless or clothe the naked or visit those who are sick or in prison. They do NOT serve the last and the least of their neighbors, and so they do not serve Christ. They may claim to love Jesus and humanity, but they do not show it or live it, for they serve themselves and do not serve their neighbors in need.

Like those who live by *The Gospel According to Sheep*, those who live by *The Gospel According to Goats* are clueless about Christ’s presence with them. They may well regret the lost opportunity to serve Christ by serving the last and the least, not because it would make a difference for others, but because it comes at a cost to themselves. *The Gospel According to Goats* is the Gospel of Greed; it is akin to the Prosperity Gospel that falsely claims that God wants you to be rich, even at the expense of others. It puts self-interest ahead of other’s needs and is “bound up in fear and scarcity,”[[3]](#endnote-3) to quote Rob Bell. It can foster self-righteous workaholics and judgmental hypocrites, and it results in suffering for all those who embrace it.

There are a lot of deep theological doctrines with which to wrestle on our Christian journeys – the Trinity, incarnation, the meaning of crucifixion and resurrection in God’s plan for salvation, the end of time – but these words of Jesus are not laden with deep mystery and veiled meaning. They are rooted in the very ground that we walk day to day – the tiled halls of schools, the carpeted waiting rooms of offices, the sidewalks of Staunton – all those places where we encounter the least of these who are our brothers and sisters, the poor and the poor in spirit, the homeless and the hopeless, those in need and those who need us. In serving them we serve Christ, in loving them we love Christ. In failing them, we fail Christ. Those who serve them are sheep of the divine flock who live by *The Gospel According to Sheep* and are blessed. Those who fail them are goats who live by *The Gospel According to Goats* and suffer the consequences. Which Gospel do you live by? Lord, I want to be in that number when the sheep go marching in! Amen

1. Charles Schulz’s comic quoted by Robert L. Short in *The Gospel According to Peanuts*, John Knox Press: Richmond, 1965, p.122 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. T.S. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) pt. I [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Rob Bell, *Love Wins*, HarperOne: 2011, p.180 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)