

**Please take a sermon prior to the worship service only if necessary due to hearing impairment. After the service, sermons are available for any who wish to take one.**

“What Are You Grateful For?”  
Matthew 25: 31-46  
by Rev. Meghan Davis  
Longview Presbyterian Church  
November 20, 2011

Wow. That’s a lot of sheep. The Psalm tells us we are God’s people, and the sheep of God’s pasture. The Gospel less tells us that when the Son of Man comes in his glory, he will separate us as a shepherd separates goats from sheep. Whenever I hear about sheep in the Bible, which is a lot, it reminds me of one of the piece from Handel’s Messiah—“All we like sheep have gone astray...” My mom love’s the Messiah and when I was growing up she played it countless times mostly at Christmas time but also throughout the year. And when I was a little, I actually thought this particular song—Oh we like sheep—was literally about liking sheep. In fact, my sister and I used to make up different lyrics—Oh we like sheep and cows and chickens, horses, oxen, lambs—you get the idea. Then a few years later I realized that the song was taken from Isaiah<sup>1</sup> and was about being like sheep gone astray and felt a little silly about my misunderstanding. But as it turns out, the biblical writers really *did* like sheep, as we see in the Matthean text. The sheep are on the right side and inherit eternal life; as a slightly less refined song by the rock band Cake notes, “Sheep go to heaven, Goats go to hell...”<sup>2</sup>

Our psalm today, Psalm 100—a song of thanksgiving and praise—reminds us that our relationship to God is like that of sheep to their shepherd. We are to be grateful to God for all good things for God made us and we are God’s. God made us, we did not make ourselves. Without God, we are literally nothing. And the psalm tells us that the proper response to God’s grace is making joyful noise, praise, and worship in thanksgiving.

And we know this. We know that we should thank God for everything. And most of us are pretty good at thanking God when something big happens. When a baby is born, when a family member emerges safely from a car accident, when we get a job, when we keep a job amid lay-offs, when our candidate wins, when our team wins. There are plenty of things large and small to be thankful for but it’s not always **easy** to be grateful.

One day when I was living in California, I was driving on a busy freeway. Looking in my rearview mirror, saw a car barreling up behind me. “Slow down!” I yelled, as if the driver could hear me. Luckily the driver did slow way down before hitting me. Watching her in my mirror I noticed she was singing along to the radio which—for some reason—gave me even more reason to dislike her. (Probably because I was listening to a news report about the terrible economy and not enjoying my drive while she clearly was having a grand time.) A little later, when I pulled into the next lane over and she passed me I made a point to look to see what bumper stickers she would have—I was certain she would have a bumper sticker and I was certain it would be something irritating. And I was right. I could see that she did have a bumper sticker. Then I saw what it said, “What are you grateful for?” Oh... That wasn’t irritating. Not at all. In fact, it was exactly what I needed to see. Immediately my mild road rage was stopped

---

<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 53: 6

<sup>2</sup> Cake, “Sheep Go To Heaven”

in its tracks. What am I grateful for? I began to list off all the usual suspects: God, family, friends, income, roof over my head, food on my table, opportunities—things that are cliché but they are cliché for a reason—because they’re true, because they are vitally important. Ok, I’ll admit a couple less lofty things made the list as well: grateful you didn’t run into me, grateful the traffic back-up reported on the radio isn’t actually here... grateful I saw your bumper sticker.

So what’s on your list? What are you grateful for? Take a second and think about it. Maybe even jot them down on your bulletin. What are the first few things you think of? What are you grateful for? If you don’t write it down, make sure to make a mental note of it. There’s going to be a test later...

So now that we’ve jogged our memories about the things we have to be grateful for, now what? According to the Psalm, the proper response to God’s grace is making joyful noise, praise, worship in thanksgiving. It’s a good start. But is enough? Maybe not. This psalm is believed to have been used as a doxology during the collection. The context for which this psalm was written, reminds us that the proper response to God’s grace, the expression of our gratitude requires giving back of ourselves. But let’s be clear: the giving back—whether through financial means or through service—is our act of gratitude for the grace of God freely given to us. We do not earn God’s grace by our acts of charity, no matter how great they may be. As John Calvin stressed, “the kingdom of heaven is not a servant’s pay but a child’s inheritance.”

Which brings us to today’s Gospel passage. On the surface, it does seem like Jesus is saying that feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, befriending the stranger are our ticket to eternal life. The reason given for the judgment and sentencing has nothing to do with the reasons we tend to think of for salvation. Jesus says nothing about faith, worship or prayer. “Faith is important [—as Jesus teaches time and time again—] but so is meeting the real needs of the most desperate members of our society,”<sup>3</sup> as Jesus so clearly teaches us in this passage.

The importance of love and mercy toward one another is a major theme in Matthew’s gospel. From the Beatitudes “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy”<sup>4</sup> to the instructions to “give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.”<sup>5</sup> It is epitomized in the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself<sup>6</sup>. And just to make sure we don’t miss the point, we get it one more time, at the end of chapters and chapters of teaching, the final discourse before the Gospel moves into the story of the Last Supper and Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection—here, at the climax of Matthew’s gospel, we get concrete examples of what we are to do. Feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, give clothing to the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned.

Through the marvel of FaceBook, I’ve been blessed to virtually experience the births of children to many friends. I remember one time in particular, when a first child was born to some friends of mine. Early in the pregnancy, the father had the sonogram on his profile. Both parents kept us all up to date on the progress throughout the pregnancy. Then, at last the beautiful little baby Louis was born. Immediately the announcement went out on FaceBook and within hours of his birth, pictures were posted for friends across the country to see. And in these pictures of this tiny, beautiful and yet helpless baby, you could see in the faces of his parents and

---

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.progressivetheology.org/SNT/SNT-2005.11.20.html>

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 5: 7

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 5: 42

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 22:39

grandparents—no one is going to let anything happen to that baby. Louis is going to be loved and cared for the rest of his life. He's got family

Another friend of mine—Peter—suffers from certain emotional and mental illness which have at times made it impossible for him to hold down a job, much less live on his own and support himself. But his parents, like Louis's parents, would do anything to help him. Doing so has not been easy. At times dealing with Peter was so difficult they wanted to throw up their hands and kick him out. They made huge financial and emotional sacrifices to support him but the way they saw it, they didn't have a choice. He is their son. They had to do whatever they could for him. At last, they were able to find treatment that worked for Peter and he was able to get his life on track. Now he supports himself and lives on his own. He's got family.

Patricia and her daughter Elaine were members of my church in Oakland. Patricia had fallen into severe dementia. When I met her, she was in a nursing home due to a broken hip, though ordinarily she lives with Elaine's family. When I went to visit Patricia, her daughter was always there and I was struck by the love, tenderness, care and patience Elaine used with her mother. While it would be easy to be dismissive or get frustrated with this person, this shadow of the woman she once was, Elaine continued to treat her as if she were still the chair of the Women's League of Voters she once was. Though Patricia probably wouldn't know the difference, Elaine came to the home every day after work and to sit with Patricia until she went to sleep. Elaine did it because Patricia is her mother who cared for and loved and did so much for her. Patricia's got family.

Now a disclaimer before I continue: caretakers, too, need care. Every situation is different and sometimes the healthiest choice is to let go. Sometimes, as Suze Orman says, helping is hurting and hurting is helping. Sometimes we have to cut off support. But I bet that almost all of you included family as one of the things you have to be grateful for. Most of us have at least one member of our family for whom we would do anything and they would do anything for us. And if not, my heart goes out to you.

But if we would do *anything* for members of our family, wouldn't we do at least as much for Christ? The goats—those on the left—ask, “when did we see you hungry.” The implication is that if they *knew* they had the opportunity to serve Christ, they would have. But *we do* know. Christ isn't simply saying, “take care of my children” Christ is saying, *when* you take care of my children, you are taking care of *me*. We know that we are not only to care for our neighbor, but we are to take particular care of those most in need—the marginalized. Feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, give clothing to the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned; and in doing so, we care for not only these individuals, but Jesus Christ himself.

It seems only fitting on this, the Sunday before Thanksgiving, borrow from the Puritans. Gov. John Winthrop, wrote the “A Model of Christian Charity” in 1630 while en route to America. This speech was famously quoted by Ronald Reagan (“for we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill”) and has been alluded to in political campaigns ever since. Winthrop knew that life would be very difficult in this new land and their only chance for survival was to work together and take care of each other as commanded by Jesus and throughout the Bible. Now bear in mind that Puritan sermons tended to last one to two hours. I will be reading Winthrop's text in its entirety. Just kidding.

Winthrop instructed, that if your brother is in want and you can help him, you need not doubt what you should do; if you love God you must help him.<sup>7</sup> OK, but what about times like these, when money is so tight and we don't know what's going to happen with the economy? Winthrop's answer, when things get tough, you need to give even more. He states, “There is a

---

<sup>7</sup> A Model of Christian Charity. Governor John Winthrop (1630 on board the Arbella)

time also when Christians...must give beyond their ability.... Likewise, community of perils calls for extraordinary liberality....<sup>8</sup>” And if we do not take care of each other? Well, Jesus tells us the goats go to eternal punishment. Winthrop’s instructions, while not quite as succinct as Jesus’, are certainly noteworthy, “Now the only way to avoid this shipwreck, and to provide for our posterity, is to follow the counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God. For this end, we must be knit together, in this work, as one.... We must entertain each other in brotherly affection. We must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others’ necessities. We must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience and liberality. We must delight in each other; make others’ conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, as members of the same body. So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.”<sup>9</sup>

What are you grateful for? What are you going to do about it? Think back on your list. If you’re grateful for family or friends, who can you visit who is lonely? If you’re grateful for a job that helps keep a roof over your head and food on the table and clothes on your body, what can you do for those who don’t have an adequate home, clothing or nutrition?

As Sharon reminded us a couple weeks ago, Longview Presbyterian Church is a family. What will you do to contribute to this, your family? Are you willing to do anything for this family? Are you willing to do anything for Christ? As Nancy Lundquist reminded us last week, this church play a valuable role in the community beyond these church walls. What will you do to contribute to your family of Cowlitz County?

A couple weeks ago, out of the blue, my five year old nephew Rowan said, "Sometimes, when you say grace, you hear a tiny 'You're welcome' in your heart." Now, perhaps I should point out that my sister and brother-in-law aren’t particularly religious. They don’t go to church and I’m not sure how often they even say grace when my mom or I aren’t around, but out of the blue, Rowan said, "Sometimes, when you say grace, you hear a tiny 'You're welcome' in your heart."

His parents replied, "Really? did you hear that?"

"Yes."

"Who said that?" they asked.

"Well, you can't know, but I know; it's God."

Friends, let us be grateful, and as an expression of our gratitude, tend to those who are less fortunate than we. We’re not called to save the world, but we are called to faith. And lives of faith require taking care of “the least of these.” In the next week, how will you serve Christ? In the next month, how will you feed Christ? In the next year, how will you clothe Christ? Throughout your life, how will you comfort Christ? What are you grateful for? Thank God with a joyful heart, praise, worship in thanksgiving. And listen for that tiny 'You're welcome' in your heart."

---

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*