

Sermon for Sunday, November 20, 2011 Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24/Matt 25:31-46 "At the Banquet Table or On It"

On Friday, Doug and I went with my son Sam and his fiancée Shauna to Maymont. We wandered around the Children's Farm, looked at the raptors, watched a black bear scratch an itch by nuzzling up to a tree stump, and enjoyed the peaceful and beautiful Japanese Garden. One of the really fun moments was visiting with the sheep and the goats. Some of the goats had managed to stick their heads, including their horns, through the bars of the fence so they could more easily reach the bits of feed that kids could buy for a quarter. The sheep looked calm, as usual. The goats looked a bit neurotic, giving us sidelong glances and appearing to wonder why we were looking at them with such glee.

They were pastured together, and seemed quite comfortable sharing the hillside. But as the evening would approach, they would be brought up from the hillside and put into the barn at the top of the hill. The sheep would go in one pen, and the goats another.

The people who take care of the animals would do precisely what Jesus describes in today's gospel. They would separate the sheep from the goats. Now the folks at Maymont would do it because their pens are clearly marked with little outlines – one has the silhouette of sheep, the other the silhouette of goats. But why would the shepherd in Jesus' story do that?

It took a little searching, but I finally got the answer. Sheep can actually remain out on the hillside all night. They prefer it. They have that warm woolly coat, after all. Goats do not. They need the warmth of a shelter, out of the cold night wind. A smart shepherd gives each of the animals what they need to survive, be it fresh air or warm shelter.

Now, that actually makes more work for the shepherd, because he has to stay with those sheep on the hillside to protect them from predators. But still, that's what shepherds do. They do what is necessary for each animal.

That's the image of the shepherd that we hear in both our old testament reading and our Gospel...a shepherd who tenderly cares for all his animals, animals who are sometimes a bit wayward and uncooperative.

It's a warm picture, isn't it? We visualize one of those Victorian-era paintings with a Jesus wearing sparkling white robes, a blue-eyed, sandy-haired Jesus bearing a fluffy little lamb over his shoulder.

There is also another picture of the shepherd that we get in these readings, particularly in the Gospel reading, where Jesus has some decisions to make, some judgments about the flock, at the end of the season. Who has done what the shepherd has told them to do? Who has been a good member of the flock, doing the shepherd's bidding?

So the shepherd becomes the judge, a very different role, requiring him to be decisive and clear rather than warmly tender.

How do we reconcile these two roles?

That's where we need to take a closer look at the reality of the shepherding business. At the end of the season, the shepherd must do some sorting of the animals. Some will be kept to make more lambs and goat kids in the next year. Some will be sold at market to provide offerings and food in the winter season. Some will be traded away. And the shepherd takes on the role of judge to decide which of his charges goes in which category. Some get kept, some – how shall I put it delicately? – get disposed of.

Jesus shifts from being the tender shepherd to being the astute and fair judge of the flock. Not so warm and fuzzy, but clear-eyed and fair.

And the remarkable thing about both the Old Testament and Gospel readings of this time of judgment is how similar they are.

In both cases, God's people are a flock under the loving care of a shepherd. Some of them are good, some not so good. The shepherd tries to train them, protect them, keep them together, but it doesn't always work quite as the shepherd had hoped, because sheep and goats, they aren't always as good as we hope for. The members of the flock who have treated the others badly, stolen their food, pushed them away from the good pastures...in a word, the

ones who have gotten fat at the expense of others...are the ones who will now suffer. Ezekiel makes it clear: "I will feed them, [those fat and greedy ones] with justice." Jesus makes it clear: "And these will go into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

The shepherd has transformed into the arbiter, judging the members of the flock.

We know that this is a metaphor describing our relationship with Jesus. We are the sheep and Jesus is the shepherd.

Now this might make us nervous. None of us likes to be judged. We know we are less than perfect, and we worry that Jesus might be disappointed in us and we might be cast out into eternal punishment. I'm willing to accept punishment for my sins, which are many, but I surely hope that I will dodge the bullet of eternal punishment.

The good news is that Jesus gives us very clear instructions on what we are supposed to do to be on the right side of his judgment seat: feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give drink to the thirsty, visit the sick or those in prison. In short, help those who need help.

And the second bit of good news is that we do some of these things. Lamb's Basket, both donating food and working at the food pantry. Lay Eucharistic Ministers bringing communion to those who are homebound or in nursing homes. Thanksgiving food baskets for Interfaith Services of Henrico.

The remarkable thing is how unremarkable these things seem to us. We don't make a big deal about bringing some food to be donated, or to go out to someone's home to bring them communion. We don't make a fuss about giving a neighbor a call. It isn't something dramatic and flashy...it is simple things, done every week, lending a hand, not expecting anything in return.

And that is the good news that we hear today. Even at the time of final judgment, that time when it's sorting time, sheep on one side, goats on the other, we need not be afraid. We have done the simple things that Jesus has asked of us, without any expectations. And because of that, we are promised eternal life. Not endless punishment, but eternal life.

We may wonder if we are good enough to be judged worthy of eternal life. This gospel is the reminder that we can be. It doesn't take incredibly dramatic work. It doesn't take martyrdom or changing the world. It simply takes doing simple things, changing things just a bit at a time. Helping one person, one little bit. "Whatever you have done for the least of these – even one small thing done for the least of these – you have done for me."

So the next time you drop a box of cereal in the basket for the hungry, or run an errand for someone, or say a prayer for someone, you are helping Jesus, and you are helping Jesus decide whether you are a member of the flock who has earned eternal life.

The shepherd cares for you, but he also must figure out whether you get sent off to become someone's leg of lamb dinner or whether you get to stay with the flock for the season. Will you be seated at the banquet table or be served on it? You decide, so he can decide. What will you do?

Amen.