

## **“What is This, a Petting Zoo?”**

*Tell Me the Stories – part #5*

Matthew 25:31-46

I love petting zoos. One of my favorites was called Deer Acres, in Pinconning. We loved going to that place, feeding the deer, seeing the little animals.

My kids love going to the Magdeburger Zoo in Germany. In particular, there was a small enclosure you could enter and play with the goats. They had tunnels, staircases, and little houses, and these animals would happily sniff and lick and almost trample you, looking for food.

I never thought much about the goats. They were just there. But someone had to take care of them. Trim their hooves. Clean up their poop. Bring them inside when it was stormy or cold. It never really occurred to me that someone spent precious time caring for these animals so that we could enjoy them basically whenever we wanted, and we could ignore them for the rest of the time.

The parable in Matthew 25 almost sounds like a petting zoo for a moment. The king comes, gathers all the nations to himself, and then separates the nations like a shepherd managing his flock. According to a commentary, mixed flocks of sheep and goats are a common sight in Middle Eastern herding. Shepherds would separate the two at the end of the day, not due to any particular value of one over the other, but simply because they have different needs. Goats aren't as fluffy – they need shelter at night. Sheep can stay out in the pasture.

However, it is after the separation that the analogy to the petting zoo falters. These are people, real people, representing “all the nations.” (Verse 32) And they are being cared for in a different way – this is a picture that is meant to

represent the end of time. The question to be resolved here is not who has cared for the sheep and the goats, but how they have in fact cared for each other.

I lived just north of Chicago when I was in college. One morning, a desperate woman asked me for a ride to a shelter. She was running away from her husband, and she even offered to give me her wedding band. I only had \$20 cash on me, but I gave it to her, prayed for her, and dropped her off at the place she requested. I thought about that shelter and that woman for a long time. I wondered, God, did I do the right thing?

Maybe you have been in that place before. You have seen a need – something desperate, like poverty, illness, dysfunction or even someone going to jail – and you wondered, is there anything I can do? Does it even matter, in the long run?

In this parable, Jesus answers, absolutely, yes. The separation of the nations, like sheep and goats, is not due to what they did for their king or shepherd, but what they did for the least of their community. In both cases, the people are surprised that their actions were noticed. The king repeatedly says, “I was sick. I was in prison. I was hungry, naked, and thirsty.” That’s unexpected and surprising, isn’t it? A king, by definition, owns everything in the kingdom. It simply is not possible for a king to be poor, hungry, or naked. And when the people on the king’s right exclaim, “We never saw you that way!” the king answers, “Oh, but you did. Whenever you did this for the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it for me.” (Verse 40)

The obviously principle here is, when we minister to others, we should see Jesus Christ, our King, in them. That, admittedly, is hard to do. Jesus - a drug addict? A homeless woman? Yes. In fact, it doesn’t even have to be someone

suffering from poverty. What if your neighbor asks for help, but they belong to a different political party? What if their values or even their religion is radically different from yours? Are you still obligated to help them?

Apparently, the answer is yes. The people on the king's left try to use the excuse, “Lord, we never saw you in need. How could we not have helped you?” The king does not except their excuse. If someone in their community, in their midst, was hungry or in trouble, “all the nations” were expected to do something about it. It did not matter if they were Jewish, Christian, or non-religious. The principle of love is applied to all.

How should we interpret this scripture in our own lives? There are a few ways to consider it. First, obviously, is at a personal level. We are the church. This is a story for us. This parable was written by Christians in the first century and is only found in the gospel of Matthew. Clearly the author thought there was a specific situation happening that needed to be address by Jesus' words. It could have been early Christian missionaries, the brothers and sisters of Jesus, who, for the sake of the gospel, were in deep need. Certainly some of them were in prison. So this parable was to direct the listeners to take actions. To serve others. It would be the same thing today as your pastor telling you, “We need to support the food pantry. Take up an offering for UMCOR. Work with closet-to-closet to help those in need. Do whatever you can to help.” This is a personal call to action, and the church must listen up. The consequences are dire if we fail to act.

Yet, there is another way to look at this scripture, although it leads to a similar conclusion. The question is, what happens to those who die without

Christ? What happens to those who may never hear the gospel firsthand simply because of their place of birth? Is there hope for them?

According to this passage, yes. First, let me be clear: I fully believe that the only way we can be made righteous before the Holy God is through the blood of Jesus Christ. The Bible says that grace is a gift (Ephesians 2:8), and there is no way we can earn it. We confess, Christ does the rest. However, there is clearly a strand of thought in the Bible that says right action takes priority over right theology. In other words, you can say that you are a Christian, you can pray to Jesus, you can make a public profession of faith, you can be baptized, but if you fail to live as a Christian, you have not partaken in the true gospel message. And this passage suggests that those who never knew Christ, who never realized that in love they were serving God, they will be rewarded with the kingdom the Father has prepared since the dawn of creation. Does that relieve us of the duty to go and proclaim the gospel? No, not at all. But it emphasizes the words of St. Francis: “Go and proclaim the gospel, using words as necessary.”

I pray for unsaved people all the time. I share my witness, I tell them about Jesus, and I wait patiently for the Spirit to move in their hearts. I also hold out to the hope that they will serve God in love even unawareness, and that because of their actions, God will grant them mercy. This passage, the story of the Good Samaritan, and in fact many other scriptures, offer me that hope.

In the end, what do we need to know? Our God is a God of love and mercy, and he expects us to live the same way. I have often thought that many will be surprised who is in heaven, when we all get there. There are some who think that they have it in with God, that their reputation will provide salvation, and to their regret, God will ask them if they served the least of these, “my brothers and

sisters,” and those people who stand before God in shame. And those who express their dismay and astonishment in the light of the glory of God, who say, “We never knew!” to them, God will answer, “But can’t you see; you did. For you served me unawares when I was in my deepest need, by serving my children.”

The call to love and mercy is infinitely more important than a trip to the zoo. We live in a time and place where the church continues to insist on separation, selfishness, and insider language. We desire to take care of ourselves, when in fact, God is asking us to take care of all. We must move our focus to beyond our four walls, to the places where the poor, hungry, naked, and lost are crying for mercy. In the end, we may indeed be judged, not as individuals, but as a church, as a people, as a nation, for how we treated the last, the least, and the lost. In the end, I would rather be surprised by God’s great mercy, than worry about legalism of who is in and who is out. Jesus indicates that there is a much greater standard we will be held to than our words: that standard is our love in action. Let us live to serve, as though our Lord and Savior was asking us to, which he is.

**Memory Verse: Matthew 10:42**

“And if you give even a cup of cold water to one of the least of my followers, you will surely be rewarded.”

**Thoughts for reflection:**

- How do you think God judges us, by our intentions or by our actions? What is your reasoning?

- What is normally your approach to another person in need? Hope another person comes along? Wait for an agency to take action? Or provide what you can?
- In what way has God shown us mercy and provided for our needs?
- How does the love of Jesus Christ and our desire to serve him impact our decisions to serve others of his family?