

“Godspell: The Sheep and the Goats”
Matthew 25:31-46

Today’s parable uses a very traditional Middle Eastern plot where the king goes to wander the streets of his kingdom disguised as a common or a poor person to see for himself how things really are. One of the famous renditions of this theme is found in the movie Aladdin where Princess Jasmine goes to the market to see real life without being known as the princess. Let’s watch a clip of that from the cartoon version of this: <https://youtu.be/7gSFDaO71X8>

The idea behind this kind of disguise is to see how people normally act instead of the good front they would put in front for royalty. The important question here is: How do we act when no one is looking? That is the idea of the parable about the sheep and the goats. Christ is among us in disguise and we often don’t recognize him.

Jesus gave this parable to help people understand his way of compassion and what it meant for them to follow it. This parable is often misunderstood to be about the final judgement of individuals. But Jesus was talking about the judgment of the nations in terms of their faithfulness to God’s ways of compassion. That is the actual word in the original language in verse 32. It is often translated as “people,” but the Greek word is “nations.” This was also in alignment with Jesus’ mission and tradition. The Jewish tradition was concerned with the justice and compassion of the whole nation and not just of individuals. They believed that being in a covenant with God was a community affair. The structures and laws of their community were supposed to be set up according to God’s vision for the world where all are taken care of. In fact, the whole book of Deuteronomy is concerned with the social structures and laws of the nation to ensure justice for all, especially the most vulnerable in society.

And so in this parable, we have two groups: the sheep and the goats. The one group (goats) lives by the values of the world. They don’t share the love of God with others and thus don’t have compassion for their neighbors. They keep it to themselves and to those they love. Those outside of their familial or social circles are invisible to them. The other group (the sheep) is the one living by the values of the kingdom of God. They are continuing to let God’s love flow through them not just to their family and friends, but also to all the people in need. They live by the principles of Christ’s compassion. The shocking part of the parable is that both groups did not realize that what they were doing was directly done to Jesus himself. The ones who cared for the needy did not know that it was Jesus in disguise that they were caring for. In the same way, the ones who did not care for the needy did not know that it was Jesus in disguise that they neglected. This is the shock of the parable. Their motivation was not to please or impress. They were living out their values instead of the values of the world. Faith involved caring for those who were vulnerable in society. It required recognizing that God was to be found in the suffering of our neighbors. Jesus was using that theme to help his followers understand that it is not enough for nations or people to just say godly things. It was important for them to practice God’s laws of love and compassion. That was the true measure of a nation’s success.

This parable from Jesus helps us to see that compassion for our neighbors is the way to know God. The presence of God is as close to us as the person we feed, clothe, protect, or visit. What will bring us fulfillment in life is living by the values of the kingdom of God, i.e., receiving God's love and sharing it, especially with those who are on the margins of society or who cannot repay us for helping them. Our lives will bear fruit when we practice compassion in our everyday life by serving and connecting with our neighbors who are suffering.

Another aspect of this is how we structure our society. There are a great many philanthropists and charitable givers in our country who do not see the need to change the laws and structures of our communities to care for the most vulnerable. Churches are often guilty of focusing only on personal acts of charity instead of also working for social transformation and justice. It is easier to focus on our individual actions instead of working with others in society to bring about social change. There are many obstacles to fulfilling God's vision for society. Consider for example our political divisions and how they make it so hard for us to work together for social justice. Consider modern theocracies and the danger of mixing religion and the state. Yet, the challenge of this parable is to work on both levels: the individual and the social.

Let's take a few moments to discuss with each other what that looks like for us. How do we act on a daily basis if we take this parable seriously? The right side will discuss our individual acts of compassion. The left side will discuss our social structures and laws and how they could be aligned with God's compassion.

I would like to end with a clip from a documentary called, "Here Am I, Send Me" about the life of Jonathan Daniels. This was a man who took the call of Christ seriously to practice the values of the kingdom of God on both personal and communal levels:

<https://youtu.be/8boZpyMP1oA>

Daniels was going to seminary in Massachusetts. He had a promising career in ministry ahead of him. Here is an excerpt from Plough about his commitment. "In March 1965, Dr. Martin Luther King called on American clergy for assistance after the brutal attack on activists at the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma. At first Jonathan was not sure - 'could I spare the time? Did I want to spare the time? Did He want . . . ?' - but after evening chapel he resolved to go south. He joined the march to Montgomery and then, after most of the activists had returned home and the camera crews had packed up, he stayed.

While managing to complete his seminary coursework, he plunged into what he called 'living theology': he helped with voter registration, photographed segregated conditions, worked to integrate a church, and lived with local families. Rachel West Nelson, whose family Jonathan stayed with, remembered that 'he was part of our family. . . . In a way, he was a part of every black family in Selma in those days.'

On August 14, 1965, Jonathan was part of a protest in Fort Deposit, Alabama. He, Stokely Carmichael, and some twenty others were arrested and held in the Hayneville county jail, where they sat for a week in the sweltering heat. On August 20 they were released and

quickly set about trying to get to somewhere safe. While some of the activists organized rides, Jonathan and a Catholic priest named Richard Morrisroe along with two local women, Ruby Sales and Joyce Bailey, walked to a local store known to serve blacks and whites.

As Ruby opened the door, a figure from the shadows warned them off the property. Then the man raised a shot gun and pulled the trigger. Jonathan pulled Ruby from the line of fire and was hit instead. He was dead before he hit the ground. The gunman shot Father Morrisroe in the back, and then walked over to the county courthouse to call the state police chief and inform him he had just shot two preachers.”

The article concludes with these powerful words: “Wherever a person stands up with love and compassion and takes a stand against violence and hatred, Jonathan Daniels is still alive” and I dare say, and so is Christ. Amen.