

“Sifting and Sorting”
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
Edina Morningside and Linden Hills UCC; March 26, 2023

Matthew 25:31-46, adapted

“When the Human One comes in glory and with all the angels, then the Judge will sit enthroned. All the nations will be gathered, and the Human One will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and will put the sheep at the right hand and the goats at the left.

Then this Judge will say to those at the right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by our Creator, inherit the kin-dom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer, ‘When was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the Judge will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’

Then the Judge will say to those at the left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and all the fallen angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, ‘When was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ Then the Judge will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Decades ago, the mayor of Portland, Oregon—a man named Terry Schrunk—was being criticized for helping someone who was poor. He’d given money to a beggar on the side of the road, and another council member objected, [saying](#): “How do you know that he’s not just going to spend that on booze?” To which the mayor replied, “How do you know that’s not Jesus Christ?”

The widespread notion in Christianity that Christ could be present in anyone around us—especially those who are poor, sick, or in need—comes from what Jesus says here in Matthew 25. He casts his imagination forward to a great judgment scene at the end of history. The virtue and vice of the sheep and goats, respectively, is revealed in their treatment of people who are *hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison*. Like the great reveal at the end of every episode of the TV show *Undercover Boss*, those before the judgment seat come to find out that what they did or didn’t do in their lives has been experienced by the one in charge of it all. *“Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”* Actions and inactions have the consequence of sorting people into sheep and goats, those who experience eternal life and those who face eternal hardship. To avoid that pain, the moral of the story might be, ask yourself in such situations, “How do you know that’s not Jesus Christ?” and act accordingly. The sheep act with mutuality to the “members of my family”, while the goats presume estrangement and distance, not taking care of one another.

While these are described as individual actions or inactions, the same applies to groups. Communities can also live with mutuality or perish due to separation. I’ve heard an echo of these possibilities this week in conversation over two words, “kingdom” and “kin-dom”. Someone raised the point at our Pastoral Relations Committee meeting on Tuesday that we still occasionally sing hymns talking about God as a king with a kingdom, even though the metaphor doesn’t hold resonance for us in a modern democracy. In fact, what we know about kings and kingdoms throughout history—division into hierarchies, centralization of power, exploitation, and domination— isn’t the kind of God we know through Jesus Christ. That metaphor is used

often in the Bible and even by Jesus himself, but in our own time there are better ways of understanding God's realm among us.

On Thursday night at the Lenten Soup Supper and worship service, Pastor Barb Martin at Union Congregational UCC gave a better option. I've heard this before from others, but I really appreciate how she put it, and she said I could quote her to you. Pastor Barb said, "I like to use the word kin-dom for God's realm because it sounds less like a bejeweled, crowned man overseeing his kingdom and more like a place where relationships between people - KIN - are really what life with God is all about." To illustrate the point, she also quoted Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, who [wrote](#) that, "all [humanity] is tied together; all life is interrelated, and we are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of identity. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. ... I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. ...[T]his is the interrelated structure of reality."

"Kin-dom" and "kingdom" sound very similar, but the differences in our behavior according to each metaphor can make or break a loving community. Likewise, sheep are not so different from goats, but what comes of their behavior in Jesus' story makes all the difference. Those who are called "sheep" on the right hand live as kin with one another—tending to the needs of the other (even God unawares), and trusting that in a community of mutuality they will be cared for in return. The "goats" on the other hand have acted according to the morality of a kingdom, allowing hierarchy, division, and separation to suggest that the needs of the other don't concern them. In failing to act for "the least of these", they cut themselves off from God's own self, and the kin-dom of mutuality which would have been their salvation in times of need. This week "the sheep and the goats" are in harmony with the distinction between kingdoms and the Kin-dom, both emphasizing the importance of mutual care.

One more voice jumped into the conversation this week too, writer Laura Yuen in a [column](#) for Friday's Star Tribune newspaper. Against the idea of a solitary genius, Yuen suggests that the best kinds of creativity happen in community. She reminds us of Daniel Kwan's speeches at the recent Academy Awards, where he took pains to highlight his immigrant parents, and the creative team with which he made the film *Everything, Everywhere, All at Once*. Kwan said at one point, "genius does not stem from individuals like us on stage, but rather genius emerges from the collective. We are all products of our context." The point, Laura Yuen summarizes, is that "innovation may start with a solitary idea, but true creativity—the kind that is surprising and unpredictable—is more likely to emerge if more people are involved in the process, adding their own ideas to the pot".

These threads have been braiding themselves together this week, as I've been thinking about this Gospel passage and our life as a church. I don't think Jesus' words about the sheep and the goats are only about feeding the hungry, visiting the imprisoned, housing the homeless, and caring for those in need, good those these things certainly are. Such practices are the fruits of an underlying conviction that we belong to each other, that we are part of an "inescapable network of mutuality". The presence of such "kindom" saves the sheep, and its absence condemns the goats.

Today in worship, and I hope increasingly in our life as a church, we'll continue to practice acting with a communal identity, caring for neighbor and stranger alike as part of God's family. Church is a time to emphasize our group commitment, our bond with one another and mutual service to the other. Together as the body of Christ, as we move from individual people and congregations into shared community, we'll experience being among the sheep. We may be those whose needs are met, or those who serve another. We'll probably be both, even at the same time. Through this interweaving of our lives into the great kindom of God, we journey with Christ and begin the life of salvation right here on earth. May God open our eyes to recognize our belonging to each other, humility to receive the care of another, and the compassionate strength to respond, bearing the burdens of another. Thanks be to God for this call, and for Christ's example! Amen.