

## **Recognizing the Sheep**

Sermon notes for the sermon  
Given by Rev. Dr. Gregory B. Young  
On Sunday, November 20, 2011

Several years back those of us who had been members of Boy Scout Troop 18 in North Brunswick held a banquet to honor our scout master, Mac. He had recently been recognized by the national Boy Scout organization for completing 50 straight years of service as scout master. Those of us who gathered for the celebration were grateful for all that Mac had given to us over the years. We shared out stories of lessons we had learned from our scout master. There was speech after speech and finally it was time to hear from our beloved scout master. Mac, fighting back tears of appreciation, said, "I never realized how much of a difference I had made in your lives. I never knew that about myself."

How true those words are for each of us. Often times we travel through life not knowing if we have made a difference in others lives. We speak a kind word to someone who seems to be down on their luck but we never get to see what became of that person or the influence our kindness may have had for her. We hold a door for someone struggling with groceries and two little children but we never get to see what happens next in that man's life or what difference our kindness may have made in his life. We go through our lives living them as best we can with little thought about the impact or influence we have had on others. If we are fortunate we do get to see some of the results but for the most part

we have no clue of the affect we have had on others. Like Mac, when we hear some of the stories we are surprised, sometimes to the point of tears.

A good friend once said to me, "Everyone is a good example." I asked him to tell me more. He shared, "Some people are good examples of how to live your life and others are good examples of how not to live your life." For me it was a profoundly simple observation of influence. I remembered how I had learned over the years and my friend was right; my older brother provided me with plenty of good examples of how not to please Mom and Dad. Others had provided me with good examples of how to live and structure my life. No one of us is perfect but each of us is a good example for others – sometimes a good example of how not to live life in God's kingdom.

Both the Ezekiel and the Matthew readings today help us to see that when it comes to ultimate things in life, such as a final judgment, God is in charge. When all of us stand before God's judgment seat, while we might think we know how God will judge each of us, God is the one who ultimately knows us better than we do ourselves. God will look at all of humanity gathered and for God it will be as easy as a shepherd separating sheep from goats; it will be obvious to God, as obvious as seeing the difference between sheep and goats. The sheep and goats will be clueless; standing before God they will have no idea what God is looking for in them. In the end God will welcome into eternal glory those whose lives were so transformed by God's love that they had no understanding of living otherwise. Their caring for others in need came as naturally to them as drinking

water when thirsty or eating food when hungry-they gave not thought to it they just helped others in need.

The goats on the other hand were in the same position as the sheep. They had no idea that they had failed God by failing to help others. They were so caught up in their own lives that they failed to even recognize or see the human need that cried out for help. Their greed and self-absorption had blinded them to others and they lived out their lives in isolation with no thought to how they might be able to help those in need.

In this teaching of Jesus we come to see first that God is the judge (the same can be said of the reading from Ezekiel) and not us. Both readings caution us not to be taking other people's inventory. We should not be so quick to judge others. Perhaps my friend puts it best when he says, "Everyone is a good example." Look at others and to others to learn the lessons of life that you will need for the journey but do not judge them while you do so.

Second, there is very little that we can do to help ourselves. God's transforming love is offered to all freely. That love comes to us most completely in God's only Son our Savior, Jesus Christ. It is when we surrender our will to God's will that the transformation begins to take place. God's love seeks to transform us from being goats to being sheep; who follow the will of the shepherd in order to live. Why do you suppose the shepherd has goats mixed in with the sheep? The nature of goats is self-preservation. The presence of goats in the flock of sheep keeps the sheep from getting into life-threatening danger. Sheep are followers

and if one walks over the edge of a cliff the other sheep will tend to follow. A goat would never walk off of a cliff and so a good shepherd keeps some goats in the flock with the hope of preserving the sheep.

I suppose we in the church would say that because of our understanding of human nature the doctrine of original sin would affirm that we are all born into this life as goats. The only hope we have is when our will becomes subject to God's will and we find ourselves transformed and living in the love of God. For most of us this is a subtle transformation that sneaks up on us and in the end surprises us just as the sheep in Jesus' teaching were surprised. Today we worship the one who has become king of our life together, the Son of God, Jesus the Messiah – the one who was born into this life as a sheep for the purpose of transforming us goats into the likeness of God.