

So here we have this story about when the Son of Man comes in his glory with all the angels and all the nations gathered around. People are divided up like sheep and goats; the sheep into eternal glory, the goats into eternal fire with the devil and all his angels, depending on how we treated the least of these our brothers and sisters.

One of the great disciplines in reading scripture, particularly in community is to wonder why a story got told. This is particularly true about this story. Why would Matthew put a story like this into Jesus' mouth? A way to think about stories is to wonder what questions prompted the story. In first Century Palestine, there was no science, there was no journalism, there was no history, except for an oral history and the great Hebrew story. There were just questions, and mystics who told stories.

So as you think about this story, what kinds of questions might have prompted the telling of it? Anyone have an idea. What questions were people asking that might have prompted someone to tell this story about sheep and goats and when the son of man comes in his glory?

- what is the point of living?
- is there a purpose in any of this?

Those of you who have been to Friday Night Live lately will know that Alan Marriott has been having the most intimate of conversations with the guest artists who appear each week. I remember when the young tenor, Tony Caruso sang the first time and Alan interviewed him. Alan asked a question that seemed to come from left field. "Tony, when you get to the pearly gates what do you hope St. Peter will say to you?" Interesting question...what do you hope St. Peter will say to you when you get to the pearly gates. Tony said one word "welcome." What are other questions that might have prompted this story?

- what happens when we die?
- what is the point of my life?
- what is the measure of my life?

That's a tough one, isn't it? If the measure of my life is revealed in this text, which it seems to be, then how I've treated the least of these my brothers and sisters is the yardstick. Was I a sheep or a goat?

The sheep, who have regularly, and consistently always given a cold drink of water to the thirsty, fed the hungry, clothed the naked, freed the oppressed...they get an eternal heavenly reward. The goats, who have not given a cold drink or fed the hungry or clothed the naked, they are banished to eternal punishment.

Seriously? That's a pretty hard standard to live up to in my mind. It makes for a great dramatic story, but I think if it's true, I'm doomed before I start. I mean, is anyone consistently a sheep? Really? In anything? I don't think it's that easy. I think instead that on some days I'm a sheep, I'm aware, I'm alive, I see what's happening to those who live at the margins and respond appropriately.

And on other days, I'm a goat. And you know, some days I pick being a goat because I'm tired, or I'm cranky or I've reached my limit, or I question the claim someone has on their limitations. Am I really going to be cast into eternal punishment because I chose being a goat one day? I remember a woman in Vernon saying to me on her deathbed "I don't know if I'm going to get to heaven. I just can't forgive my step son for the things he's done. I just can't." Can you hear the question? Is the measure of my life dependent upon my forgiving my step son? It comes down to this?

What are we learning from the church about our ticket to heaven? What are we learning about how we're going to be measured? What are we learning about God's love? In these questions and these stories, I hear that people are learning that God's love is completely and utterly conditional.

The apostle Paul wrote, and the church continues to misinterpret "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." That comes from Paul's letter to the church in Rome. Any statement that begins with "if" puts a condition on the outcome. If you confess...you will be saved. If you forgive, you'll get in. If you treat the poor well, you'll have an eternal heavenly reward. The corollary, if you don't, you won't. I don't know what you hear in all that but, it sure seems inconsistent with God's unconditional love that the same church talks about. I think we understand Paul better in an earlier passage from Romans, which I'll share with you in a few moments.

I'd like to stop this madness right now. I'd like to try on something completely different. If God's love is unconditional, then imagine Alan Marriott's question again: What would you like St. Peter to say to you at the pearly gates? What would St. Peter say to the drug addict, the sex trade worker, the white collar criminal, Idi Amin, the suicide bomber, the perpetrator of child sexual abuse, Paul Bernardo, Saddam Hussein, Adolf Hitler? What would they want St. Peter to say at the pearly gates?

Friends, the only God I can believe in; the only God in which I live and move and have my being, is the God who instructs St. Peter to say “welcome” to them all.

Okay everybody...breathe. I've said this before in a conversation at Waves, and believe me I have heard many protests. If Hitler can get into heaven, why should I even bother living a Christian life? Why should I even care about what happens to the earth, to my neighbour, to the least of these my brothers and sisters, to myself? And you'd be asking a really good question. But think of it, if the measure of any life is how any of us behaves, none of us gets to heaven.

Friends, we pursue a life of faith because it's how we want to live our life. A life of faith holds out the promise that we will become more fully who we have been created to be. A life of faith holds out the promise that we will come home to ourselves. We don't do it because we think it will earn us a place in heaven.

So that makes the business of eternal grace; the business of eternal salvation; the business of resurrection purely, simply and solely God's. Not on what we think. The work of resurrection, yours, mine, everyone's, is God's. You've already heard me say that Jesus did not die on the cross for your sins in some cosmic sacrifice. When he was on the cross, I was not on his mind. There was nothing but pain, and separation for him. I do not believe for an instant that in all that pain and suffering Jesus gladly bled and died for me. There was no one who felt more forsaken, broken, unloved, and mistaken. Period.

He was as fully human as anyone could be dying on that cross. The human condition is the human condition. You yourselves know what you have been through in your lives. You know your own ups and downs. You know the days on which you have been a sheep and the days on which you have been a goat. You have known what it feels like to be forsaken, unloved, and afraid. Is that the last word? Is that how you wish to be measured? Is that the unconditional love of God? NOT.

We have this pesky, unrelenting, compelling notion of resurrection. It's very simple. Death is NOT God's last word. I don't mean that we won't die. We all die. It's how we're made, its part of the cycle, the circle of life. But death is not the last word. I can't tell you where we go. I don't know. I simply know it's not the last word. Death was not God's last word for Jesus – his disciples experienced him in a whole new way. I've heard people tell me they've experienced the presence of their loved one who has died in a variety of ways. When we die, maybe our energy returns to the energy of all life. Maybe we live in the hearts and minds of those who remember us. Maybe like the tenth good thing about Barney we become great compost for new life to take root in us. I haven't a clue.

I'll say this again. The business of what happens when we die is in God's hands. Entirely. And that business happens to everyone! Hitler included. There is no place else to go. The very real death, and the very real resurrection of Jesus tells us what the apostle Paul attempted to say to those who would listen:

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God." And we can know this because of what happened Jesus.

Friends, this is the gospel. Believe it, wrestle with it, live into it. May it bring you peace. Amen.