

Fifth Sunday of Lent

March 15, 2015

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown, MD

Reading: Matthew 25: 31-46

"I Paid for Those Goats"

Grace and peace to you from God – Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen

In 1992 I spent a weekend in Virginia Beach with two teenage girls from my youth group and 1800 other senior high youth and advisers. It was my first Lutheran Youth Encounter Senior High Gathering and I had no idea what to expect. What I experienced was high energy, great music, fun and pure, challenging gospel. What I remember most was the message of one of the speakers whose name I cannot, for the life of me, remember or find. So I'm going to call her Pastor Anita. She was an African American, female, Lutheran pastor from Minnesota – which was a rather unusual combination in my then short Lutheran experience. Pastor Anita spoke on today's gospel story and held 1800 youth spell bound.

She began by telling us that when the Lutheran Youth Encounter staff called to tell her she was to speak on Matthew 25: 31-46 she thought, "Oh, no! I do NOT want to preach on Matthew 25. Of all the texts, please no." To the people on the phone she said, "Isn't there another text we could use?" No, that's the text we need you speak to. Inside, Pastor Anita was throwing a tantrum, "I don't want to speak on Matthew 25." She tried another two or three times to get the Youth Encounter folks to change their minds, but they wouldn't budge. It was the right text for that night of the gathering. "And do you know why I don't want to talk about this text?" Pastor Anita said as she waved her bible, "Well, just listen..." And she read the gospel passage we just heard.

She slammed her Bible shut. "See why I don't like this text? What a picture! The shepherd is separating these goats and sheep. The sheep get eternal life. The goats get eternal punishment. I see it in my head and I'm afraid to look. Which line am I in? I want to look but I'm scared to see. When I do peek, I see there are a lot more goat than sheep. Do you see why I don't like this text?"

"I want to be a sheep but I can be such a goat. I wanted to be good but there was that candy bar I stole. I want to be a sheep but I was such a goat. In high school. I was one of those popular girls who said such cruel things to those outside our circle. I want to be a sheep but I can be such a goat. In college it was all about me. I didn't even notice the guy at the dorm desk or the girl crying in the bathroom. I want to be a sheep but I'm a goat. I'm in seminary, working on a sermon at the all night diner. Butch, one of the regular street guys, is walking around looking for someone to buy him a cup of coffee. I turn my back and

dig my head into my books. I don't have time for this pesky guy. I'm a goat. I want to be sheep. But I'm a goat. That's why I don't like this text. I can see it and I don't see any middle-aged, pudgy sheep with my black face in the picture. By this time the whole room was silent. "I want to be a sheep. But I'm goat, trudging in that line with all the other goats." Over and over she'd say "I want to be a sheep. But I'm a goat" and give another example of uncaring behavior that sounded too familiar. Soon we all felt ourselves trudging along with her, our heads bowed down in shame, because no matter how much we want to be sheep, we act like goats. Trudge, trudge, trudge closer to that eternal punishment. Trudge, trudge, trudge. The whole room was under the weight of our goat-ness. "But suddenly," Pastor Anita said, "I hear a voice." She paused. "It's Jesus. What is he saying?... Jesus is shouting, "Wait a minute. Stop right there. I paid for those goats!"

One of the youth screamed, "Yeah!" and the whole place erupted. Everyone spontaneously stood and applauded. It was the exhale of those who suddenly found themselves rescued by grace. It was the sound of immense gratitude because you know you do not deserve to be saved but there Jesus is — "I paid for those goats!"

That is the story I always remember when I hear this gospel. Both the sheep and the goats belong to the Son of Man — the Son of Man who will come in all his glory is the same Son of Man who was handed over to be crucified. Jesus the Christ, "the one who will one day come to judge us, is the same one who first came to be judged for us."¹ In Jesus we place our trust, for our lives and our eternity. It is not our behavior that secures, wins, buys or earns eternal life. "Amen and thanks be to God," we goats exclaim. But that is not the only news Jesus wants us to know in the deeps of our lives

When we read these parables and stories of Jesus in which one group or person ends up being cast out of the wedding feast or tossed into darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth or is sent to eternal punishment, most of us immediately focus on that part and whether we will be in the wrong line. It's a very goat-like thing to do - --- make it all about us and usually thinking ourselves surely to be the vineyard worker who has worked the longest, the good son who stayed home with Dad, the servant who stayed vigilant and industrious while our master was away. But that's NOT what Jesus puts in the spotlight. The Son of Man would have us look, instead, at how we live. Leave the end time judgement to him AND know that our attitudes and actions matter tremendously to God. Yes, live in the freely given, unearned promises and grace of God AND live knowing we are held accountable for how we live.

"I was hungry and you gave (or did not give) me food. I was thirsty and you gave (or did not give) me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed (or did not

welcome) me. I was naked and you gave (or did not give) me clothing. I was sick and you took (or did not take) care of me. I was in prison and you visited (or did not visit) me.” You might think Jesus is just giving us a check-off list of good works to earn our disciple badges, like good, Jesus scouts. You might except that Jesus throws in a huge curve.

“Just as you did (or did not) do it to one of the least of these, you did (or did not do) it to me.” The poor, hungry, imprisoned, needy are not just “causes,” controversies or notches on our do-good belts. They are the Lord’s beloved, too. Like us, they are held so deeply in God’s heart, that when they hurt or when they receive care or kindness, God feels it, too. Yet neither the sheep nor the goats knew that. “When did we ever see you hungry, thirsty, imprisoned?” they both ask, utterly surprised by his words.

When the goats ask, “Lord when was it that we saw you hungry.....” It’s a desperate, defensive goat bleat of “Not fair!” Or, “Come on, Jesus, if we had known it was YOU, we would have jumped at the chance to help and care for you!” Which, in fact, says “I gladly help those I deem worthy” and leaves unspoken the very self-righteous, “and those I deem unworthy are on their own.” But wait. The sheep did not know they were helping Jesus either when they fed, clothed, visited. The sheep responded with compassion to hurting, lost, lonely, in need people. They did not judge the people but responded to their pains and needs without calculations or thought of return. The sheep did not only do good works but lived lives of mercy. They had let the grace, help, love, forgiveness of Jesus shape their very character, so they noticed and felt for the least, lost and last as Jesus would. The graciousness of our Lord who “paid for those goats” was not lost on those goats — it transformed them.

Next Sunday we’ll gather to celebrate Jesus entry into Jerusalem with a parade of palms. Next Sunday we’ll hear about the obedience and sacrifice Jesus willingly offered so we might be freed from the condemnation of sin and fear of death. The question this parable and Holy Week poses to us is this — does the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and the eternal grace and love of God really mean anything or not? If it means something, it changes everything, including me and you. No, I’ll never be fully a sheep or saint on this side of eternity — situations will still get my goat and blind me to Jesus in my midst. But Jesus didn’t pay for those goats so we would trudge in shame and miss the miraculous power of God’s grace. The Lord who is in the hungry, thirsty, sick and imprisoned is in us, too, providing all the power we need to be God’s own sheep. We’re not to stay the same. It is God’s great delight to love and tame goats to joyfully live lives of meaning and mercy to the glory of God. Will we let God do that?

