

Sermon for the Last Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year A

Mr. Kyle Potter

November 26, 2017

St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Matthew 25:31-46

Today's Scripture lessons call us to turn our attention to a world in pain. The reminder hardly seems necessary. We live in the digital age. We don't have to walk down certain streets to see pain or despair; we can find it in the apps on our phones, or on our Facebook feeds. Unless we deliberately wall ourselves off from information, we know about more instances of suffering than we can remember. We know about more than we can process emotionally. We know about more than we could ever act upon. If a mosque is attacked in Egypt, we know about it. If Christians are killed in Nigeria, we know about it.¹ Facebook tells me that many of my friends cannot afford health insurance — and all of this, while I wait for my morning coffee to brew. There are other causes of pain that are much more subtle. How many people do I know who quietly struggle with depression, or addiction, or an abusive partner? So many things clamor for our attention. I know that many of us feel compassion for so many of these horrors, but I also feel a little guilty. I wonder which of these things I should care about more. Should I feel more deeply? Should I put more time and energy into charity work? How much is enough? These questions bother me. So when Matthew's Gospel

¹ "Egypt mosque horror 'will work against extremists,'" BBC News, 26 November 2017 [<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-42127745>]. Accessed 27 November 2017; "Nigeria Christians hit by fresh Islamist attacks," BBC News, 7 January 2012 [<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-16442960>]. Accessed 27 November 2017.

tells us yet another angry Jesus story about what happens in barnyards, I am less than enthusiastic.

Several years ago, I took a spiritual retreat with a pretty diverse group of folks. Thirty minutes in, we were invited to consider some sticky moral dilemmas and to argue with one another, “What Would Jesus Do?” (I promise that this isn’t how we run retreats at St. Mark’s.) We all made our arguments, and I learned that Jesus surely thought that the unemployed should try harder, the youths should pull up their trousers, that the rich should be less greedy, that the poor should be more grateful, that divorcees should be shamed, that gays should get back in the closet, that politicians should be more moral, and that addicts should try harder. In other words, we used this idea of “Jesus” as a cypher for our ideals and our prejudices. In the imagery of this parable, we were all pretty sure who was a sheep and who was a goat.

The challenge of spiritual abuse

Now, here’s where this becomes insidious. For each of these little prejudices that we pinned upon Jesus, I know that we good, religious folks found a reason to tell people that they’re outside the remit of God’s compassion. Now, to be clear, this is the Good News: the God of Jesus Christ loves sinners. The God of Jesus Christ loves sinners. And some of us hear this, and we say, “Yes, BUT...!” We pick our favorite symbols of goodness, and we hold those up above the cross of Christ. We tell people, “Sure, God loves everybody, but we need to talk about standards. If you want to know that love, there are some things you gotta fix first. Get rid of that tattoo. Put

on a dress. Don't wear a dress. Get the right haircut. Get your ex-spouse to get back with you. Stop saying "gay." Quit smoking. Forgive your abuser. Some religious folks reject the message that the God of Jesus Christ loves sinners, and preach instead, "there's something wrong with you that puts you on the outside of God's compassion." Church nerds have come up with a special label for kind of wickedness: spiritual abuse.² Someone is being spiritually abused when they're trained to think that God's invitation is extended to anyone except themselves. When people have suffered spiritual abuse, petty human judgments reverberate so loudly within their hearts that they cannot hear either God's promises, or the real warnings of Scripture.

Jesus, shepherd to the godforsaken

That's why we keep going back to the Scriptures — the testimony about King Jesus, from the first communities that he formed. You see, there's good news in this parable of judgment. There's good news in Ezekiel's prophetic denunciation. The good news of Jesus overturns our petty judgments.

To be a sheep or a goat in this story is a moral distinction, and not an anatomical one. God is a shepherd, and is in the business of gathering sheep — not scattering them. This is Jesus' agenda, and this is his warning: he is the good shepherd to the sheep. He gathers up the scattered sheep. He is looking for the least, the lost, and the left out. He wants us to join him in

² For a written introduction to this concept and a helpful podcast discussion about recovery, see The Liturgists, "Spiritual Trauma," 15 May 2017 [<http://www.theliturgists.com/podcast/2017/5/16/spiritual-trauma>]. Accessed 27 November 2017.

this. That's why he invites Matthew's community to transfer their devotion to King Jesus over to the hungry, the imprisoned, the cold, and the sick. What you do for them, you do for me, insists the Lord. These are the very people who seem to be forsaken by God, and yet Jesus identifies with them wholeheartedly and completely.

When we look at the scattered and malnourished sheep — the hungry, cold, sick, imprisoned, depressed, mentally ill, addicted, or despairing — and we say, I just mind my own business, and follow the rules, that's goat talk. If we look to people in need, and say, "God helps those who help themselves," we are goats. If we make it our concern that everyone should get exactly what they deserve and not one little bit more, we are accursed, and have every reason to fear God's judgment. If we pass petty judgments upon others, so that some of us can sit in church, hear the Scriptures, chant the psalm, and take Communion, and still worry, "this is for everybody but me," we are goats, and not sheep.

The way of solidarity

So what do we do? How will we be sheep, and not goats? I want to be shaken out of making judgments like that, and I want to be protected from other people when they make those judgments, too. I want to follow Jesus, and gather rather than scatter. Some people will read this text and tell you it means that everybody you meet who has any need at all is an occasion for a divine pop quiz. Oh, there's Jesus in that widow! There's Jesus in that beggar! And in that schizophrenic man! Can you help them all at the same time, and

still make it to choir practice? This is well-meaning, but gravely mistaken. Life is not a video game. The Lord's sheep are not Pokémon.³

I think the Lord of this text is calling us to something both easier and much more difficult than giving handouts. Jesus invites us to mimic him in offering solidarity to people that the world considers godforsaken. Solidarity is a relationship in which we allow the concerns of other people to touch our lives in an open-ended way, and we offer one another more than a periodic handout. It's easier, because we know that we're not going to build relationships with every person we encounter. It's also much harder, because it means laying down our lives when we might prefer to just write a check.

We sustain this open-ended solidarity through love, creative thought, and prayer. At Saint Mark's we do this together. We welcome people who have been wounded by other religious communities. We welcome and listen to one another over coffee and meals. Some of us don't have families. Some of us have lost spouses. Some of us are struggling to find work. Some of us are fighting addiction or depression. Everybody here needs to be listened to and cared for, and that's what we do here. If anybody in this church is gonna drink alone on Thanksgiving or Christmas, it'll be over my dead body. We offer welcome to divorced folks, and to LGBT folks. We don't just do this in-house, either. We speak up for people on the margins of society, who get used and thrown away under the auspices of efficiency or law and order. We're learning to better resist misogyny and white supremacy. We make common cause for justice in both word and deed. Some of us are involved in

³ For those of us over 25: this refers to a smart phone game, based upon a card game, based upon a popular anime, in which players find, catch, and collect "pocket monsters."

community organizing with Common Ground. Some of us feed people at the Gathering. We give food to the Riverwest Food Pantry. We offer Christmas gifts to homebound folks through East Side Senior Services, and we collect diapers for mothers during Advent and Epiphany. We look for ways to take up the struggles of others.

You see, we do these things because King Jesus himself has come alongside the very people that the world, and even some Christians, consider godforsaken. In the Jesus movement, we repent of those kinds of judgments, so that we can find ourselves on the right side of God's judgment. When Christ comes again, we want him to find us as his own sheep, alongside the least, the lost, and the left out.

Amen.

Kyle D. Potter, MTh(Oxon), MTS
Lay Preacher, Episcopal Diocese of Milwaukee
kyle.potter@gmail.com

Further Reading

Hauerwas, Stanley. *Matthew*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos, 2015.

The Liturgists, "Spiritual Trauma," 15 May 2017

[\[http://www.theliturgists.com/podcast/2017/5/16/spiritual-trauma\]](http://www.theliturgists.com/podcast/2017/5/16/spiritual-trauma).

Manning, Brennan. *The Ragamuffin Gospel*. Colorado Springs, Colo.: Multnomah, 2015.

Wright, N. T. *Matthew for Everyone*. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2004.