

Grace and Peace from God our Father and Jesus Christ, our King.

They make a similar bleating sound, and they are both ruminants – cud chewers. Aside from that sheep and goats don't really have much in common. Shepherds often tended them together because they have different preferences for grazing; sheep prefer ground grazing; goats prefer leaves and branches though they'll eat just about anything. If you spend much time with sheep and goats the differences become all too apparent.

Elois told us at Bible study this week that the Macdonalds had four sheep who behaved as though they were literally joined at the hips. They acted as a unit. Everywhere they went, everything they did, they did abreast. If one sheep came to you, the other three moved in tandem. If one darted right, they all darted right. If one stopped, they all stopped. If one put their head in the feed bucket, they all did. And it wasn't always the same one leading. If one reacted, they all did. Sheep are simply communal creatures. Think about it. It's implicit in the name.

What do you call one? Sheep.

What do you call more than one? Sheep. Maybe the words the same because you rarely see one without seeing others with them.

Goats on the other hand are, well, completely on the other hand. Even in a group, goats act independently. As opposed to willingly following the lead of any other, goats stubbornly persist on their own course. A guy I painted for in Seminary – Jim – had a goat. Because it ate anything and everything within reach – the barn siding, the kid's toys, the clothes on the line – Jim kept the goat on a 20 foot chain, mostly because it

ate things – like tin cans – made it sick. That goat was so intent on eating the leaves off the tree that it was chained to that it jumped up on the dog house near the end of its tether. It reached and reached for branches further and further away until it lost its balance. Unfortunately, the chain had gotten tangled in a branch, and the goat hung itself. Stubbornly independent to a fault. With the possible exception of that goat, goats are also much smarter, as a rule.

Jesus selects the separation of sheep and goats as an image because like most of Jesus' images, separating sheep and goats at the end of a day was a familiar scene. The sheep and goats had to be separated on cold nights because sheep with their thick wool could withstand the cold, while goats had to be pulled out to be sheltered on cold nights.

Jesus clearly chooses the separation in this parable as the primary motif, but the sheer difference between the animals also plays an notable part in the telling. *Lest any of Jesus' hearers be tempted to think that by their behavior they can move from one group to the other, the example clearly makes that impossible.* A goat cannot become a sheep, nor a sheep a goat. *We can no more change our essentially selfish nature than a goat can change itself into a sheep.*

Why then tell us of the separation at the judgment if there's nothing we can do to influence the outcome?

I think it goes back to something Jesus says earlier in Matthew's gospel, chapter 19:

"Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." ²⁵ When the disciples heard this they were greatly astonished, saying, "Who then can be

saved?"²⁶ But Jesus looked at them and said to them, "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:24-26)

The short hand version; ***while goats cannot change themselves into sheep, God who created both can accomplish that change.***

People often mis-interpret this parable as a moralism like:

*You better watch out; You better not cry;
You better not pout; I'm telling you why;
Santa Claus is coming to town.*

*He's making a list, and checking it twice
Gonna find out who's naughty and nice;
Santa Claus is coming to town*

*He sees you when you're sleeping; He knows when you're awake;
He knows if you've been bad or good.
So be good for goodness sake!*

But clearly, the actions of the “sheep” and “goats” in the parable are not a matter of intention; neither of them remembers those things. The point is that ***sheep do what sheep do, and goats do what they do. Their nature precipitates their behavior.*** Their actions are natural – coming from their nature. Like an apple tree produces apples, not pine cones.

Jesus isn't telling us to avoid acting like the goats and act more like sheep – to change ourselves from goats into sheep. That's simply impossible, can't be done. Hence, humanity's stellar record of continual improvement: we keep killing each other, exploiting each other, etc. If you think I'm calling you goats, you would be correct. You are goats just like me. Just like Martin Luther, St. Francis of Assisi, Bishop Eaton, Pope Francis, and all the apostles.

I suggest that Jesus knows us better than that – is smarter than that. I think Jesus parable intent is to make us earnestly desire to be the people at God's right hand. But seeing that it is not within our power to transform our nature from goat to sheep – from selfish to selfless, Jesus hopes that we will beg for God's mercy to transform us by God's power into the people who care as much about the least of these as we care about ourselves. If we cannot do it ourselves, but we earnestly desire to be the people at God's right hand, we must learn to rely every moment of every day on God's transformative power – the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus isn't trying to lead us to obedience – something we fail at rather regularly – but rather to dependence. Because only with God's constant influence can we become the people at God's right hand. This parable is not about earning a heavenly reward, but about beginning a daily relationship of trust and devotion with the King of the universe.

When we come to know and live under the gracious Lordship of Christ the King, who provides and cares for us, we can begin living once again as the sheep God created us to be, just as Jesus himself does.

When Jesus faces the despots of the world in Jerusalem, coming face to face with Pontius Pilate, *He chooses not to preserve Himself, but do what's best for all. Jesus allows them to do their worst.*

Hanging Jesus on the cross they no doubt thought that *they had clearly demonstrated their superior power. Three days later after the worst they could inflict, Jesus rises from death demonstrating His superior Kingdom and reign, and ascends to the right hand of the Father to shepherd God's sheep. Amen !!!*

In the waters of Holy Baptism God makes us subjects of the now and forever king of the Cosmos. In baptism God ***begins the work of the Holy Spirit, and gives us the tools to*** reclaim the child God made to live with and for God and others from the world that corrupts us.

This morning as we proclaim the words of the Creed, we pledge our allegiance to Christ the King and His eternal kingdom. ***We pledge – with God’s continual help – to live for Christ and for others, even in the face of a brutal world.***

In Luther’s famous words:

*Though hordes of devils fill the land, all threat'ning to devour us,
we tremble not, unmoved we stand; they cannot overpower us.
Let this world's tyrant rage; in battle we'll engage!
His might is doomed to fail; God's judgment must prevail!
One little word subdues him.*

AMEN !!!