Notice, too, that neither sheep nor goats know to which group they belong, until the shepherd sorts them. Once sorted, they haven’t the slightest idea how they got there. This is not about God’s people Israel being destined for salvation, while the Gentiles go to perdition. Jesus is spinning a new narrative. The distinctive feature is not ancestry or faith tradition; but rather some invisible mark only the shepherd-judge knows. That distinguishing mark, Jesus tells his listeners, is whether they live in a caring, compassionate way. It is not lineage, but love. Not ethnicity, but empathy. Not membership, but mercy.

This was a truly revolutionary message, and not one many of Jesus’ listeners welcomed. As God’s chosen people, they wanted their prejudices confirmed, their patriotism supported, their prestige validated, their participation counted. Instead, Jesus says, “Look, the last judgment will not be as you expect. The judge will look not at outward circumstances, but deep into the heart. Some who think they are sheep will find they are goats, while others who thought they were goats will discover they are sheep after all.” Not all Israel will be saved, and not all Gentiles will be lost.

All people will be judged, and many will be found worthy, both within Israel and outside it. The standard of judgment will not be the usual self-righteous human standard. It will have nothing to do with what groups we belong to, and everything to do with the people we reached out to. It will have nothing to do with the love we felt inside, and everything to do with the acts of love we accomplished for others.

“But what about faith?” you ask. “This sounds like works-righteousness.” Protestants know that we are not justified by good works, but by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ. The parable of the sheep and the goats does not rule out justification by faith. But it does hold up a truth we are sometimes less eager to recognize: that *genuine faith leads* *to good works*. If you do not have good works, you probably do not have a good faith.

At the Thanksgiving table, for at least a few moments, we told God how thankful we are. The message of this unsettling parable is that God is not as interested in our thankful words as God is in our thankful deeds. If our faith is more a matter of believing than doing, then there is a great need for a change of heart and habit. It’s possible that the stewardship of our time is more important than the stewardship of our money. We encourage tithing 10% of our income to God’s work. But what if we gave 10% of our *time* to God, personally reaching out to help the least of these, who are members of Christ’s family?

If daily we spend 8 hours a day sleeping and 8 hours at work, that leaves 8 waking hours. One-tenth of that is 0.8 hours. Multiply that by seven days, and you get just over 5.6 hours a week. Just think what we could accomplish for God if every member of every church tithed 5.6 hours a week to helping others! An army of willing, compassionate Christian workers would rise such as the world has never seen! When the Great Shepherd of the sheep calls us into his presence and asks us to account for our time, how will we answer?

Try giving a little of your time to God’s work, and your life will be enriched. Such was the experience of a wealthy Christian who went on a trip to India, sponsored by a group called the Ministry of Money. The trip was called “a pilgrimage of reverse mission.” The trip’s leaders explained their goal was to get the group in direct contact with poor people. After a visit to Mother Teresa’s mission to the destitute and dying of Calcutta, the man wrote:

“I was feeding a withered, brown old man with a gray stubble beard. He was too weak to sit up and was covered with a blanket. I accidentally spilled a few grains of rice onto his neck. At first, I didn’t want to retrieve the rice because I didn’t want to risk touching him. After some time, however, I realized that the rice was probably uncomfortable to him and that the only thing to do was to remove it with my own fingers.

“As soon as I touched him, all heaven broke loose. He began to speak, smile, and wiggle his head in that peculiar Indian way. Though I couldn’t understand the words, the body language was unmistakable: he was overwhelmed with the simple joy of a kind human touch. The feeding continued for some time, interspersed with numerous outbursts of joy from him.

“A big, childish, irrepressible grin came over my face. I had become infected with his joy…Joy just seemed to flow between us as we looked at each other…I realized that up until this point my reading, thinking, and experiencing of Calcutta had focused on the suffering of the poor and on the identification of Jesus (and ourselves) with their suffering. But here I was being confronted with an experience of pure joy which seemed to contradict all of that. If indeed I had met Jesus in this man, then I had met not only the suffering Jesus, but also the Jesus of great joy.”

There is another story, closer to home, about a Presbyterian Church in Texas. This church gave money to build a clinic which provided healthcare for poor people in their area. Not long after the clinic opened, the church’s governing board learned that some of the poor being cared for were undocumented immigrants. This created a sharp division in the church. Some believed their support should continue, and some believed it should be cut off because giving healthcare to “illegals” was to disregard the laws of our country.

After many meetings and much prayer, the governing board turned to a conflict-resolution specialist who challenged the group to take a field trip to the clinic and experience its ministry firsthand. A meeting was set up with the medical staff, but when the elders got there, they found everything running behind schedule. The receptionist asked the group to sit in the waiting room until the doctors and nurses were free.

One of the harshest critics of the clinic was an older man, who happened to catch the eye of a tiny Latino boy who was there with his mother. Without a hint of hesitation, the boy toddled over to the man and gave him a big smile and climbed into the man’s lap. Before long, the boy was playing with the elder’s tie and laughing, as the man entertained him with his grandfather’s repertoire of games and songs. At long last the group members met with the medical team. The older man asked about the little boy and his family. Yes, they were undocumented. They had come in that day to receive the basic care nearly every American child receives, but not commonly available to poor people south of the border.

Later, as the group discussed their experience, this man who’d opposed the clinic project spoke about how it important it is to provide healthcare to all God’s family, regardless of legal status. The group voted to continue their funding of the clinic. “When did we see you sick, Lord?” “You saw me in the dark and laughing eyes of a little boy. He spoke no English and you no Spanish, but your hearts met and danced with each other.” Compassion knows no border or politics or doctrine; compassion is discipleship at work, it is faith in action.

What sort of harvest does God reap? Some think God’s harvest is our harvest: the portion of the money and time that we donate to God’s work. But God’s harvest is more than what we give: it is who we are. *We* are the harvest. *We* are the ones called to help and heal and hope for those in need. *We* are the sheep that the discerning judge separates from the goats. *We* are the ones to whom, by sheer grace, Jesus may one day say, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.”

Prayer: Creator God, thank you for your promise that while the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, summer and winter, day and night, will not fail. Thank you for allowing us to share in the work of the harvest. We thank you for nourishing the miracle of life and praise you for the dignity of sharing in the work of your almighty hands. Bring to fruition the work of your kingdom. Make us part of that joyful harvest in which your loving purpose is completed. Help us to realize how important the smallest words and deeds are in the context of eternity. At harvest time when we remember your goodness, make us grateful for all we receive from the labor of others who have sown the seeds of faith, hope and love in our lives. We pray in the holy name of Jesus. Amen.

**Whose Harvest?**

Sunday, November 26, 2023 [Matthew 25:31-46](https://biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+25%3a31-46&language=en&version=NRSVUE)

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Harvest is when we celebrate all God’s many blessing to us. As the hymn says, “All is safely gathered in, ere the winter storms begin.” Harvest is not something most of us experience first-hand. Fresh food is brought to the market in refrigerated trucks, and seasonal produce is available year-round, hauled in from warmer states and other countries. If we plant vegetable gardens in the summer, it is by choice. We don’t need to do it, but we do enjoy the taste of fresh tomatoes. To us, the difference between a good harvest and a bad one is a couple dollars per pound in the produce section, not whether we eat or go hungry. For Jesus’ disciples, the harvest was a subject of intense personal interest.

When Jesus talked about a shepherd’s harvest, separating sheep from goats, his audience understood. Shepherds raised sheep and goats together for practical reasons. Sheep can be quiet, docile creatures. Goats can be feisty, stubborn things. If an intruder sneaks up to steal the herd, the goats will raise a ruckus that brings the shepherd running. When time came to shear the sheep or bring them to market, the shepherd separated the sheep from the goats, staff in hand, nudging each beast one way or the other. When Jesus teaches about God’s judgment, he recalls this familiar scene: sheep go one way, goats the other.

Many hear this as a guilt-inducing story; the assumption is that some will go to heaven, and some will not. But this may not be how Jesus’ listeners heard the tale. The first line likely grabbed their attention: “All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats…” (Matthew 25:32). “*All the nations* will be gathered before him.” Jesus’ Jewish listeners probably thought, “this is the moment for which we’ve been waiting. Now we’re going to hear how God will deal with those Gentile goats, while we sheep from Israel will be saved.”

 But the story plays out a little differently. Jesus deals them a surprise ending that shakes their beliefs. Notice, first, that neither sheep nor goats recognize the Messiah when he comes. *All of them* are equally clueless. “Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty, or a stranger or naked or imprisoned?” The Messiah answers, “Just as you did it to the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” *Members of my family?* Jews and Gentiles did not mix, so is Jesus really suggesting that all are members of the same family? Yup. All part of God’s family. The determining factor between the two groups is not ethnic identity, as Jesus’ listeners suppose.