

Parable of the Sheep and Goats
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by

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When Apple's co-founder and CEO, Steve Jobs died last month, I read about a TV commercial he had recorded 15 years ago. I went on the Internet and found it on YouTube. With images of famous people like Albert Einstein, Martin Luther King, Thomas Edison, Muhammad Ali, John Lennon, Ameila Earhart, and Gandhi flashing on the screen and Jobs narrating, the script begins, "Here's to the **Crazy Ones**, the misfits, the rebels, the troublemakers, the round pegs in the square holes. The ones who see things differently. They are not fond of rules and they have **no** respect for the status quo. You can quote them, disagree with them, glorify or vilify them, but about the **only** thing you can't do is ignore them, because they change things, they push the human race forward. And while some may see them as the crazy ones, we see genius. Because the people who are **crazy** enough to change the world, **are** the ones who do." Then the Apple symbol appears with the logo: Think Different.

I would argue that in today's gospel, Jesus is urging **us** to think differently and to change the world. In the last few weeks, we have heard parables teaching the disciples, that until Jesus returns, they must always be ready and not be afraid to act. Now in **today's** parable we are shown **how** to act, namely out of love and sincere concern, especially towards those **most** deprived. In Matthew this is Jesus' farewell speech right before his crucifixion. It's meant to be intimidating, because it's a judgment scene, which virtually **shouts** at us to get our attention, as if to say, take your Christian life **seriously!** Helping the destitute is **not** a means of gaining salvation, but rather is a sign that one **already** has been redeemed. We are saved **by** grace, but we are saved **for** good deeds! Is our passion, our love of God, so great and has this relationship changed us so **completely**, that we can forget ourselves in God's passion for the people God loves, the **least** among us? As one commentator has noted, we had not realized that when we opened our hearts to Jesus, he would bring **all** needy humanity with him. In reality this should **not** be shocking because during his life, Jesus was hungry, thirsty, often homeless, and was a stranger to many people, yet he was fed, given water, a place to stay, and welcomed. Why wouldn't he expect his followers to treat others, the same way people cared for him?

But what I love most about this parable is that Jesus takes the world's conventional expectations of who is going to be saved, and **shatters** them. We are **not** going to be judged, according to this parable, on personal behavior, namely who is righteous, particularly as the religious authorities of Jesus' time believed. Rather Jesus says judgment will be based on our relations with other people, and whether or **not** we were compassionate. Now what is fascinating about the parable is that **neither** the sheep nor the goats knew what they were doing or **not** doing was **for** Jesus, probably because they assumed he would appear in a **majestic**, triumphant form, not as hidden or obscured

in the disfigured faces of the unfortunate. The main difference between the sheep and goats was the sheep seeing the world through the eyes of Jesus, namely no categories, no distinctions, no conditions, were then galvanized into merciful actions. Also the sheep did their compassion humbly, simply acting out who they were, at their core, not to get recognition or earn brownie points in their heavenly bank account, which incidentally is **not** love, but bargaining. They couldn't **even** remember doing these deeds, because they didn't do it for themselves. Rather it was a way of **thanking** God for God's free generosity and blessings to them, for saving them from themselves. So how can **we** say to the poor, pull yourself up by your bootstraps or too bad you got yourself into this mess, when Jesus graciously intervened for **us**, even though **our** separation from God was our **own** fault. So whenever we see a poor person, we are looking into a mirror and viewing our **own** spiritual poverty.

Jesus says **every** person we refused to help was him. Why? Because every human life is sacred bearing the image of God, and thus deserves dignity and aid in his/her need. Can we see God's glory inside every person instead of the weak humanity with which that glory has been clothed? Yes, serving poor and homeless people can sometimes be scary, but do we love Jesus enough to follow him wherever **he** leads us rather than where **we** want to go? Can we set aside our personal standards of who is or is not worthy of receiving help and assist unconditionally? Christ the King challenges us to follow him in the most unexpected places and people. A well known bishop who grew up in a charismatic church remembered there was a lot of enthusiasm, shouting, and jumping. Yet his mother once told him, "It isn't so much how **high** you jump, but what you **do** when you come **down**!" The challenging conclusion of this parable is that it is not enough to say I am a good person. If like the goats we ignore doing simple acts of love for our neighbors in need, **all** our other good deeds don't really matter and nor can we hide behind our noble causes or religious activities to shield us from the harder and more demanding task of helping those nearest to us.

Four weeks ago I participated in an Interfaith protest march through the financial district following a replica of a golden calf, a symbol of the idolatry of wealth, to show support for Occupy San Francisco, a local chapter of Occupy Wall Street. As we demonstrated before the major banks and Federal Reserve building, it felt as if we were **praying** with our feet, to quote the Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel, when he marched at Selma with Martin Luther King in 1965. The protesters, who are witnessing **for** justice and **against** hypocrisy, are upset that three years ago, Wall Street wrecked the U.S. economy and not **one** single person has been held responsible for it. They are standing in unity with millions of Americans suffering from the consequences of corporate greed, especially banks that gamble with our savings and foreclose on our homes yet get infused with hundreds of billions of dollars to stay afloat and make record incomes, a **real** unemployment rate close to 16%, and the harmful influence of business's money to buy political favor. The top 1% of the U.S. population earns more income than the bottom 50% but pays lower taxes and the richest 400 Americans own more wealth than the bottom 150 million Americans, creating a tremendous disparity between the rich and even the middle class, which is rapidly shrinking. The Occupy movement has said they **don't** have confidence in our leaders to fix these problems or even **hear** the pain of

the marginalized, so they're going to show up, speak up, and **stay** till someone does something right.

Whatever you may think of them politically, and I believe the issues they are raising are greater and of longer lasting value than the current encampment controversies, what I noticed when I visited Occupy SF, was how the unemployed were standing together with the truly homeless, everyone with an equal say, in seeking a more equitable society and speaking truth to power, realizing they are **all** in this together. There is no us vs. them, only **we**, the 99%. We **must** find solidarity with each other, putting aside normal divisions, as we seek a society that works justly for **all** 100 %, in which the ethic of materialism and the selfishness of global capitalism is rejected and replaced with a redistributed prosperity that can be shared by all and not hoarded by a few. The connection of the Occupy movement with our Gospel is that if we are to commit ourselves to care for the poor, the homeless, the unemployed, the helpless, then we need to speak out against sinful systems that create poverty, economic injustice, and oppression. Jesus' gospel command to love the least among us **also** applies to human institutions, businesses, and governments, because individual or private charity can **never** do enough. The Occupiers remind us that as a nation we tend to blame the "least of these" for our problems and then punish and exploit them for our own greedy and power-hungry ways.

There is a story about a Special Olympics race. The teen-aged participants excitedly placed themselves along the starting line. Each one was proudly outfitted in running shoes and shorts with a number pinned to their shirt. At the sound of the gun, the race to win began. Not many competitors were fast, but **all** of them were running their best until a young woman tripped and fell. As she stumbled, a competitor saw what had happened and came to a full, sudden stop. Danny knelt down and asked in a loud voice, "Marlene, are you okay?" One by one the other runners went to the spot where Marlene and Danny were helping each other up. As remarkable as that was, then wondrously, all the contestants linked arms and walked together to the finish line. They knew that it did not **really** matter who crossed the finish line first. They understood that what is **most** important are the supportive relationships of trust and friendship.

My sisters and brothers in Christ, **this** is the image of the caring community populated by spiritual visionaries, that Jesus imagined in our Gospel, based **not** on getting ahead or competition but rather offering each other, the kind **mercy** God has lavished on every one of us. Jesus is calling **us** to be the rebels, the troublemakers, the round pegs in the square holes, to think and act differently, to be more **sheep** than goat, and to let love, justice, and compassion be the primary criteria by which we as disciples **live** the faith we profess. During these perilous economic and politically divisive times when so much is at stake **now** and for the future, as Christians, are **we** willing to be the **crazy** ones **ready** to start changing the world?