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 deprised. 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?