

Episcopal Church

Last Sunday after Pentecost:

Proper 29 (A)

November 26, 2023

A Sermon by the Rev. Joseph Parrish

DRAFT

“What’s with the goats?”

The Gospel: Matthew 25:31-46

Jesus said, “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. 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, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will

answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil

and his angels; for I was hungry, and you gave me no food, I was thirsty, and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger. and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison, and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’

Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal

punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Come, Lord Jesus, and heal us.

Amen.

What’s with goats, anyhow, in this parable? I had to drink goat’s milk for years as a young person who was allergic to cow’s milk, so goats actually saved my life, or at least made my life much more pleasant since as a child goat’s milk helped me not to have an asthma attack. And today, one of my favorite

cheeses is goat's cheese. Go figure. I seem to have some biological affinity to goats.

We started a new church inside our big old church down in Elizabeth, New Jersey. We converted our parish hall into a small church which would hold about sixty to seventy max. And we made a 'pitch' to the many new Hispanic families who had moved into our town from Jersey City, from whence they had been displaced due to 9-11. After 9-11, the lengthy cleanup of the World Trade

Center site made it impossible to build any new office buildings on that twelve-acre site, so companies and corporations began to build and expand right across the Hudson River in Jersey City and Hoboken, which sit directly on the Hudson River, and connect to downtown Manhattan by the PATH train, one stop or two. So from 2001 through 2012 dozens of tall high rises and even skyscrapers began to appear in Jersey City and Hoboken. The local result there in Jersey City was to increase rental values three times or more. But since

Jersey City was largely a Spanish barrio at 9-11 due to its affordable rents and accessibility to Manhattan, Jersey City suddenly became unaffordable to the average Hispanic family; and they picked up and moved about ten miles west out to the end of Route 139 which is a limited-access four-lane free highway that crosses the Hudson River over the Pulaski Skyway and ends at Terminal A of the Newark Liberty International Airport, which just happens to be in Elizabeth; Terminals B and C are in Newark, but the end of the four or six

lane Route 139 is at Terminal A in Elizabeth.

As a result, when I was a part of the Episcopal Church's new initiatives program led by the Rev. Tom Brackett, at the Episcopal Church Center in New York, we were given the challenge to do a 'walk-around' of our churches; so I did a 'walk-around' of St. John's in Elizabeth. What I found was eye-opening: almost every business and facility around our church was suddenly bilingual: the bank was bilingual, the MacDonald's hamburger store was

bilingual, all the bodegas were bilingual, and so on. And our church right in the center of Elizabeth between City Hall and the Union County Courthouse was just about the only facility that still spoke only English. The Mayor and most of the City Council spoke only English; the County Executives and County Freeholders spoke English almost exclusively, but our church neighborhood was over eighty percent Hispanic. That was eye opening to us. Have you ever done a walk-around of your church recently? Anyway, I

realized I needed to learn Spanish. I had taken Latin in High School and German in college and had to pass a French written exam in grad school, and learned a little Russian; and I took Greek and Hebrew in seminary, but I had never taken a course in Spanish. So, I got a multiple-CD Spanish self-taught Spanish class which I played on my car CD player every morning and evening when I commuted back and forth to my church. Finally at Lesson 28 I was competent at about the third grade level in Spanish; I had also taken a series of classes in

Ocala, Florida, at an inter-denominational church which specializes in teaching pastors how to plant churches. As a result, I had an idea of beginning an Hispanic ministry at St. John's. At first, we could only attract about six to eight Hispanic folks at a 5 or 6 pm Sunday service. So, we decided to 'bite the bullet' and try an 11:30 am Sunday morning Hispanic service which would follow the 10 am English Eucharist. One of our Vestry members happened to be the district leader of the Boy Scouts in mid and northern New

Jersey, and he too was struggling with the challenge of how to bring Hispanic youth into the Boy Scouts. So, we teamed up with one of his Boy Scout leaders who had grown up in Cuba and who was bilingually fluent, and we began a program which we hoped would produce new members for both the Boy Scouts and for our shrinking Sunday School. Our bilingual advisor said that what most every Hispanic boy wanted to do was to learn to play soccer, because their fathers all knew how to play soccer, or they watched soccer on television

every week. So, we made up an 8 by 11 flyer touting Soccer and Scouts that had a picture of an amazing young soccer player suspended in air and kicking a soccer ball—a very action-packed picture, to say the least. And, in the bilingual verbiage on the flyer, we promoted the idea of a combination of Boy Scouts and soccer — “Scouts and Soccer” was the name of the program that began at noon on a Sunday. And on the bottom right of this one-page golden paper flyer was a small section that said “Missa en espanol a onze media

Domingo”, a “Mass in Spanish at 11:30 am Sunday.”

Well, what was the long and short of the mailing?—we mailed just over 19,000 flyers to people who had Hispanic last names, a mailing list we could buy for about \$250. Lo and behold, on the first Sunday afternoon we had dozens of children and their Hispanic parents show up, and over a month we recruited two hundred Hispanic youth between the ages of six and thirteen who desperately wanted to play soccer. Two hundred--I kid you

not--and with their parents or at least one parent accompanying them.

As it turned out, very few were interested in Scouts, but all were vitally interested in soccer. And at 11:30 on the first Sunday morning, we had forty-six Hispanic folks show up for our Spanish mass, but none of them were the parents of the Hispanic youth. I had learned how to celebrate in Spanish from one of my nearby Episcopal clergy friends, and I just “google translated” my 10 am English sermon and used it for the 11:30 Hispanic service. And the Hispanic folk

could understand it--amazingly. Google had made great strides in translating English and Spanish figures of speech. Today (2023) that 11:30 Sunday Eucharist averages almost 150 per Sunday, I was told, and had forty-seven children and adults confirmed in November. So it was and still is a hit.

One of the key features of what made everything work was that we had already begun a Sunday afternoon simple meal every Sunday (chicken hotdogs, potato salad, coleslaw, and ice tea) which is now served mainly by the 11:30

congregation, who also supply much of the food; that feeding program now feeds about 150 each Sunday including about forty percent of the homeless Elizabeth population who are invited to share the meal with all the parishioners.

But the ‘secret’ behind getting the Sunday meal going was a family of a man who had been a drug dealer and who had been incarcerated for half of his life until he finally became drug-free at age 34. He became the ‘life of the party’, directing the feeding, keeping things in order, and gaining the respect

of everyone. And during the Hispanic service he could provide an ongoing Spanish translation of things I was only able to say in English, such as the announcements. What a gift. Tattoos were no barrier for the folks coming to that service, even though in general they did not have tattoos; but he and his sister had multiple tattoos. It was the love that he and we were able to give that was the price of success, and the secret of success. We cannot turn our backs on those in our community who are food challenged. Many can barely make rent

payments each week and each month, so having one decent meal per week was a Godsend for them, and for us as a church.

God does indeed work in mysterious ways. God knows sheep from goats, even sheep who are made up to look like goats. Christ is not fooled. And when we go with Christ, we will always succeed.

Here is one example of a Franciscan blessing from the twentieth century:

May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships, so that you may live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may work for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation and war, so that you may

reach out your hand to comfort them and to turn their pain into joy.

May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in this world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done.

Read more at

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/carlgregg/2011/11/four-spiritual-practices-for-preaching-on-matthew-25-a-progressive-christian-lectionary-commentary-on-mt->

[25-for-nov-20-](#)

[2011/#2cMfI1uDmDsuw1W5.99](#)

Happy Thanksgiving. Amen.

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Description:

Last Sunday after Pentecost:

Proper 29 (A)

November 26, 2023

DRAFT

“What’s with the goats?”

Matthew 25:31-46

We humans are not able to discern spiritual sheep from goats: only Christ can do that. As we feed the hungry, give love to the unloved and oppressed, and freedom to those imprisoned by fear and

hunger, we become the needed hands of
God in our world.

Tags:

Hispanic, bilingual, mass, Eucharist,
sheep, goats, drug, dealer, family, feed,
meal, Boy Scouts, soccer, parents,
Sunday, hotdogs, coleslaw, potato, salad,
tea, rent, justice, prisoners, google, 9-11,

World Trade Center, Jersey City,
Hoboken, PATH, Pulaski

St. John's Episcopal Church

61 Broad Street

Elizabeth, New Jersey 07201

The Last Sunday after Pentecost:

Christ the King (A)

November 20, 2011

A Sermon by the Rev. Joe Parrish

“Who is the Christ?”

The Gospel: Matthew 25:31-46

Jesus said, “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. 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, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king

will say to those at his right hand,
‘Come, you that are blessed by my
Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for
you from the foundation of the world; for
I was hungry and you gave me food, I
was thirsty and you gave me something
to drink, I was a stranger and you
welcomed me, I was naked and you gave
me clothing, I was sick and you took
care of me, I was in prison and you
visited me.’ Then the righteous will
answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we
saw you hungry and gave you food, or
thirsty and gave you something to drink?’

And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a

stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

May we see you in others, O Christ.

Amen.

An ancient monastery, “once a great order [that] had met waves of anti-monastic persecution in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and it [had seen] the rise of secularism in the nineteenth and twentieth century, and as a result all its branch houses were lost, and it had become decimated to the extent that there were only five monks left in the decaying mother house: the

abbot and four others, all over seventy in age. Clearly it was a dying order.

“In the deep woods surrounding the monastery there was a hermitage. As the abbot agonized over the imminent death of his order, it occurred to him to visit the hermitage and ask if by some possible chance the hermit could offer any advice that might save the monastery.

“The hermit welcomed the abbot at his hut. But when the abbot explained the purpose of his visit, the hermit could only commiserate with him: “I know

how it is,” he exclaimed. “The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in all the nearby towns. So, the old abbot and the hermit commiserated together as they read some scripture. The time came when the abbot had to leave. They embraced each other. ‘It has been a wonderful thing that we should meet after all these years,’ the abbot said, ‘but I have still failed in my purpose for coming here. Is there nothing you can tell me, no piece of advice you can give me that would help me save my dying order?’ ‘No, I am sorry,’ the hermit

responded. ‘I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you.’

“When the abbot returned to the monastery his fellow monks gathered around him to ask, ‘Well what did the hermit say?’ ‘He couldn’t help,’ the abbot answered. ‘We just commiserated and read the scriptures together. The only thing he did say, just as I was leaving — it was something cryptic — was that the Messiah is one of us. I don’t know what he meant.’

“In the days and weeks and months that followed, the old monks pondered these words and wondered whether there was any possible significance. The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us monks here at the monastery? If that’s the case, which one?

“Do you suppose he meant the abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant the Abbot. He has been our leader for more than a generation.

“On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly,

Brother Thomas is a holy man.

Everyone knows that Thomas is a man of light.

“Certainly he could not have meant Brother Elred! Elred gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even though he is a thorn in people’s sides, when you look back on it, Elred is virtually always right. Often very right. Maybe the hermit did mean Brother Elred.

“But surely not Brother Phillip. Phillip is so passive, a real nobody. But then, almost mysteriously, he has a gift

for somehow always being there when you need him. He just magically appears by your side. Maybe Phillip is the Messiah.

““Then each monk thought to himself, of course the hermit didn’t mean me. He couldn’t possibly have meant me. I’m just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? O God, not me. I couldn’t be that much for You, God, could I?”

“As they contemplated in this manner, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on

the off chance that one among them might be the Messiah. And on the far-off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.

“Because the forest in which it was situated was beautiful, it so happened that people still occasionally came to visit the monastery to picnic on its tiny lawn, to wander along some of its paths, even now and then to go into the dilapidated chapel to meditate. As they did so, without even being conscious of it, they sensed the aura of extraordinary

respect that now began to surround the five old monks and seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of the place. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling, about it. Hardly knowing why, they began to come back to the monastery more frequently to picnic, to play, to pray. They began to bring their friends to show them this special place. And their friends brought their friends.

“Then it happened that some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more

with the old monks. After a while one asked if he could join them. Then another. And another. So within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order and, thanks to the hermit's gift, the monastery was once again a vibrant center of light and spirituality in the realm.

Carl Gregg, who posted this version of an old anonymous story concludes, "This story helps demonstrate that the practice of serving Christ through serving the poorest among us (or the practice of affirming the light of God in

all people) is a disposition and a set of behaviors that must be cultivated and carried out over time. The day-to-day practice of compassion and of love toward your neighbors, (toward all your neighbors!), is much more important and difficult than simply believing a creed or a set of doctrines.”

Amen.

(Note: This story is adapted from the Prologue of M. Scott Peck’s “[The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace](#)”; however, the story’s original

author is unknown and there are many similar versions in circulation.)

Read more at

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/carlgregg/2011/11/four-spiritual-practices-for-preaching-on-matthew-25-a-progressive-christian-lectionary-commentary-on-mt-25-for-nov-20-2011/#2cMfI1uDmDsuw1W5.99>

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