

They Did Not Know, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. 27051120  
Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24 and Matthew 25:31-46  
Elon Community Church, United Church of Christ, 20 November, 2005

This is the last Sunday of the church year. Next Sunday is the First Sunday of Advent. That is the beginning of a new church year. Advent leads to Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost again. The season of Pentecost ends today on Christ the King Sunday. This is a day to recognize that Christ is Lord, the ruler of universe.

This passage, Matthew 25:31 and following, is called the parable of the last judgment. It describes God's agent, the "Son of Man," (Jesus) returning as ruler of universe. He judges all nations, separating people into sheep and goats. Those who are like sheep are invited to enter into God's kingdom because they treated others with compassion.

This passage had a great impact on me when I first read it in High School. It offers a compelling argument. It caused me to re-think my position of whether I was worthy of heaven or not.

What makes the story about the judgement of sheep so poignant is that those who inherited the kingdom of God, did not know it. We can imagine their pleasant surprise: "I didn't know I was doing anything for you, Jesus. I was simply serving those in need."

It's baffling to me that fundamentalists and Biblical inerrantists neglect this passage when they emphasize Romans 10:8 where Paul says, "if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Those who would exclude others from heaven because they are not Christian, need to read this passage. The sheep in Jesus' parable of the last judgment did not confess Christ. They did not have to be born again. They simply treated others the way they wanted to be treated themselves. If someone was thirsty, they gave that person a drink. They gave food to the hungry. They welcomed the stranger. They took care of the sick. They visited those in prison. I haven't done too well in those categories. I haven't visited anyone in prison in five years. How have you done?

This parable implies that we should feel a tinge of guilt when we see a man in a heavy coat lying under a signpost, or riding a bicycle picking up bottles. It should bother us to see a homeless woman laden with bags walking up Church Street. Our normal defense is to rationalize: "It's just another burned out drunk;" "They squandered all they had;" "He can't hold down a job;" "She doesn't want to work." "They enjoy living that way."

Don't write that person off so easily. Those are rarely the correct explanations. Often, they are former mental patients: the ones we used to care for, whether properly or improperly, in institutions. Changes in federal and state government policies have forced them out onto the streets without training or provision.

I remember when one volunteer at a homeless shelter discovered her former neighbor who had gone through a particularly painful divorce. She was going to school to earn a degree. She worked hard during the day, but she had no home.

I performed a wedding for a couple once. She had lived for a year out of her car, avoiding her sexually abusive step father. She worked hard during the day to earn money, but had no home other than her automobile. If you saw her in the morning climbing out of her car piled high with all of her earthly possessions, you would have thought she was a bum. She was a beautiful bride, and today has a wonderful family.

"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.”<sup>1</sup> The manner in which we treat the sheep is the way we treat the judge! Why should we help one of least of these in need? Because they are members of God's family. They are our brothers and sisters.

You say, along with me, “But I can't meet every human need!” No, of course not. And it wouldn't be helpful for guilt to paralyze us into inaction. Our hearts must be there, though, and our time and efforts must be there to back our hearts up. We cannot remain protected in ivory towers built upon stones of excuses.

I had a beautiful typo in a worship bulletin one morning. The hymn title read, “Lean On, O King Eternal.” The title was supposed to be, “Lead on, O King Eternal,” God leading us in paths of righteousness and service, but we don't always follow. It is easier for us to remain in our cuddly homes, to ignore need when it is staring us in the face. In fact, God *needs* to lean on us to do God's work in world today.

It is up to us. God will find other ways to get God's work done, I suppose. There are many volunteers in the hospital who are not Christian. Many young business executives volunteer for Habitat for Humanity who are not church members, but they are interested in a church that puts faith into action.

There are opportunities for service through the church. There are Special Fridays, the Allied Churches Homeless Shelter, and Habitat for Humanity. Financially, gifts to Our Church's Wider Mission provide mission work around world. There are other kinds of thirst and hunger. There is a hunger for companionship. There is a thirst for spiritual meaning. We can provide those. We must strive for balance between serving others and serving those within the church who are in need of comfort, and care, giving them sense of dignity and worth.

There is a comfort in knowing that we all stand in judgment of God. We know, even with much evidence to the contrary, that the world is not in chaos. In the end, we all will face the same judgment. We know, hard as we try, we miss opportunities to feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, and visit those in prison. We need to keep on trying, knowing that ours is a loving and compassionate God.

Here is how loving and compassionate our God is. The story goes that Saint Peter was at the gate of heaven. He was distressed, because the heavenly census was so much higher than the number he had recorded at the gate. One night he sat out to see what was going on. He saw in the shadows many people, and he switched on the searchlight. Lo and behold, there was Jesus sneaking people over the wall!

God is the good shepherd, gathering the dispersed flock and healing the hurt. The lost will be found and cared for. It does not matter that we may have been led astray by earthly shepherds, leaders with wrongful intentions. We are ultimately under the eternal care of the good shepherd. God will not allow us to be lost. “Lean On, O King Eternal.” “With deeds of love and mercy, the heavenly kingdom comes.”

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<sup>1</sup>Matthew 25:40