

1) That was pretty clear, wasn't it?

At the end of the day there are two kinds of people: sheep and goats.

And at the end of the world, sheep get eternal life and goats get eternal punishment.

Anybody here wanna be a goat?

I don't do well with *either/or* ultimatums, do you?

The world in which I live doesn't sort itself neatly into simple, clear cut "*either/or's*"

Given the forced options of carrot and stick, I get resistant and resentful.

Why does Jesus have to sound so shrill this morning?

Do you suppose he's just having a bad day? Not a chance.

In the short space of two chapters,

MT's Jesus throws down one stark *either/or* after another—

with benefits just heavenly for the *eithers*; and dire cosmic consequences for the *ors*.

- At the coming of the day of the Lord, he says:

Two will be in the field—one will be taken, the other left

Two will be grinding meal together—one will be taken, the other left.

So, Jesus warns, *be on alert 24/7 for a day that's coming you don't know when.*

- He then holds up pictures of two servants: one faithful, the other wicked

On the day of reckoning, the good guy gets promoted.

The bad guy gets cut in pieces and thrown out

where there's "weeping and gnashing of teeth"

- Next we get treated to five smart bridesmaids, and five stupid ones

Those wise enough to bring midnight oil

get invited to the wedding banquet when the groom arrives.

These who forget their auxiliary oil jug

get the door slammed in their faces and left out in the dark.

- And then, as we heard last week, two go-for-broke investors

double their master's money and get handsomely rewarded.

One risk-averse servant buries his talent in the ground

and gets banished into outer darkness, where there is—guess what—

weeping and gnashing of teeth.

2) Really now--doesn't all this just sort of set your teeth on edge?

Theology as melodrama—heroes and villains,

crude moral categories, devoid of any circumstantial nuance whatsoever.

There was a time, when talk like that would put the fear of God in folks.

In a secular society we tend to dismiss it with a giggle or a snort.

And yet . . . in the arena of political discourse,

we're getting a steady diet of such *either/or* thinking, aren't we?

It's red meat for partisan true believers,

but not particularly productive in addressing our economic crisis, is it?

But it does feed a tendency deeply engrained in our cultural psyche—

to divide the moral world into *either/or's*,

and then, as a group of righteous *eithers*, summarily denounce the *ors*.

Some years ago, somebody did a survey of religious beliefs.
A significant majority of those surveyed said they believed in hell.
Of those who did, almost no one thought that that they would end up going there.
But practically everybody said they knew someone else who surely would.
Once the initial chuckle fades,
the implications of that deep down feeling are sort of sobering, aren't they?

- 3) So why would Matthew record not just one vivid *either/or* image
from the communal memory of Jesus teachings,
but a whole string of them, one after the other?

I wonder if, rather than trying to ignore moral complexity and ambiguity,
Matthew may actually be trying to sensitize us to the reality of both.

- 4) This week, David Brooks did a provocative op ed piece in the New York Times
on the deep moral tragedy that has been unfolding at Penn State.
He puts his case far more eloquently than I ever could, so I'll let him speak for himself.
There has been, he says, not just atrocity but vanity. The vanity, he says:
*is the outraged reaction of a zillion commentators over the past week,
whose indignation is based on the assumption
that if they had been in the shoes of the head coaches,
they would have taken action.*
*Unfortunately, he continues, none of us can safely make that assumption.
Over the course of history—again and again—the same pattern has emerged.
Many people do not intervene. Very often, they see, but they don't see.*

Brooks goes on:

*Some people suffer from Motivated Blindness.
They don't see what is not in their interest to see,
Some people don't look at things that make them uncomfortable.
The mind somehow grasps what is going on, and rushes a protective filter into place,
thus steering awareness away from what threatens.
People are really good at self-deception, he concludes.
We attend to the facts we like, and suppress the ones we don't.
We inflate our own virtues and predict we will behave more nobly than we actually do.*

- 5) Brooks is, in concepts, I think, describing what Matthew draws in pictures:
the natural human tendency to OVERLOOK.

Indeed, I've done it thus far in this sermon, haven't I?

Spent so much time focused on the sheep and the goats,
that I haven't once mentioned "the least of these"—
the folks whom Jesus identifies as members of his family.

For that matter, I haven't even talked about the King,
and this on a day explicitly designated as The Feast of Christ the King.

Truth be told, I wonder if, both by my focus, and by my lack of focus,
I have just betrayed my identity as a goat—as someone who, according to Jesus,
simply isn't seeing those who are ultimately important in this picture.

- 6) So I want to go back and look at the picture again,
hoping it can help me reset my sights.

Both the sheep and the goats, apparently,
are equally clueless about the fact that they were seeing Jesus
in the face of those whom they encountered—or failing to see him there.

But each group, I think, is clueless in a very different way.

Notice how the goats lump together all the folks whom they have looked right through:

*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?*

Six of one, half a dozen of the other—what’s the difference? They’re all the same—
distractions at best, obstructions at worst.

We’ve got places to go, people to meet, agendas of our own to advance.

The kind of “not seeing” with which the goats are afflicted
is what Brooks calls motivated blindness.

The goats do not see what it is not in their self-interest to see.

7) But the sheep—listen to how they respond to the King:

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 say 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?

As I listen to them talk, what I’m hearing is that they were so focused
on giving food, drink, and clothes—on welcoming strangers—
on visiting those stuck away in homes, hospitals, and prisons
that they didn’t have time to take a second look,

much less calculate whether or not they were earning any moral merit badges.

They were just seeing very particular people with very different needs,
and doing their best to meet those needs, and meet those people.

8) This “not seeing” of the sheep, I submit,

is of a totally different order than the “not seeing” of the goats.

The goats are self-centeredly “not seeing.” The sheep are selflessly “not seeing.”

There is a world of difference, indeed,

an eternally significant difference in these two very different kinds of “not seeing.”

And so, when the sheep get rewarded—

their reward consists simply in being invited fully into the kind of family connections
that they have been building all along.

In a word, they are given leave, at last, to live into what they have been praying:

“Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

9) And when the goats get punished—they, along with the devil and his angels,

are consigned to burn with same kind of driven agendas of self-aggrandizement

that have prevented them from seeing their fellow human beings in the first place.

Sheep and goats alike—all get not so much what they deserve, as what they desire—

whether or not, at the end of the day, or the end of the world, it is really good for them.

10) So this picture Matthew’s Jesus paints is not intended as a threat, but as a wake-up call:

Do a deliberate double take—look at those you meet again;

because what you do not focus on has as much to do with determining

who you are and will become as who or what you do fix your attention on.

11) But even now, we are still focusing attention on sheep and goats, aren’t we,
rather than on the least of these, and on the king.

Well, it turns out that to really see the one is to really see the other.

Someone who, for a long time, has been a regular participant in Street Church
told me this week that some of the homeless folks who gather there
are starting to look positively radiant.

I wonder if that transfiguration hasn't come from, week after week,
just showing up and seeing, talking, and eating with them—
and thereby beginning to see them for who they really are.

I wonder if the Transfiguration of Our Lord in glory
that three disciples were allowed to witness was intended not so much
to give them a glimpse of Jesus' solitary, exclusive glory;
as it was to prepare them for, and prompt them toward
seeing all women and men as God sees them—charged with divine glory.

Matthew's graphic sheep and goats image commences with Jesus coming in his glory.
and sitting (quote) "on the throne of his glory."

Then the sheep are invited to share the glorious kingdom inheritance,
that they have, without realizing it, both conveyed to, and honored in
those with whom they have, as colleagues, shared the mundane necessities of earth.

12) Matthew's Jesus is not simplifying moral complexity—

He is acknowledging that there's always more going on than we get around to seeing.
Perception is inevitably selective.

What we select sets the context for how and what we see.

At the end of the day, and at the end of the word
what we end up seeing makes a difference.

So Matthew isn't coming to us this morning with a carrot and a stick.

He's bringing us a pair of glasses with progressive lenses.

Lenses that help us to get a better focus on what is right under our noses,
but also to see, as well, how those whom we might easily ignore

are intimately associated with the one whose glory is beyond the stars.

Look! Matthew says, Now look again! What you see will make you say, *Oh God!*