

*John Docherty, November 26, 2017*  
**“I will seek the lost”**

There are some scripture passages that are a joy to read.

There are some that are uncomfortable from beginning to end.

And then there are some that are a delight to read – until you hit a snag : some part of the passage that either catches you off guard in an uncomfortable way, or that brings in some element that you'd frankly rather ignore or slide past as if it weren't there.

Today's reading from Matthew is one of those passages that, for me, start off well enough, then take on a tone that becomes increasingly uncomfortable, until finally slapping you in the face with an extremely unpleasant image.

The passage begins with a fairly upbeat, neutral picture :

“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.”

So far, so good. You have a group of people, and you are going to split them into two camps.

One of the commentators I read on this passage, made what I thought was a bit of a condescending observation about separating sheep from goats. He remarked that in Palestine, sheep tend to be white, and goats tend to be black, so it would be easy for a shepherd to separate them out.

Well, I'm no shepherd, but it seems to me that any shepherd worth his or her salt would be able to tell a sheep from a goat without the need for them to be colour-coded ... even *I* could do *that*.

But, of course, the point of the passage is not whether or not there is a risk of some goats getting mixed in with the sheep, or some sheep getting mixed in with the goats – the point is that there is a clear separation between these two groups.

And that separation is defined by the next few verses – verses that strike me as a perfectly solid set of guidelines for living one's life.

I love the fact that they aren't presented just as a list of things one should do. Jesus doesn't say : “take note of the needs around you; feed the hungry; give drink to the thirsty; welcome the stranger; clothe the naked; take care of the sick; visit the prisoner; ...”

He doesn't present that list, to which everyone within earshot would nod and gravely express agreement that, yes, we should all do these things.

I love the way he subtly suggests that it isn't a matter of believing that these things are good. It matters that you live out that belief.

And I'm always struck by the insistence that there is a very direct link between how we treat each other and how we treat God; that how we live out our faith in our relationships with each other is a clear reflection of what we believe faithfulness to be – far more so than what we *say* we believe about faithfulness.

I love the innocent surprise of those who are praised for what they've done for God, and the shocked disbelief of those who are reprimanded for what they've *not* done for God.

I love the fact that Jesus highlights the care provided to “the least” of those created in God's image as being the standard by which we will all be judged.

But I stumble a bit at the notion of judgment that permeates this passage.

Actually, it's not the idea of judgment, *per se*, that causes me to stumble. Any parent knows that kids need to learn that there are consequences for certain kinds of behaviour – both negative behaviour and positive behaviour. Kids have to learn that life isn't a free-for-all; that there are some things that just simply aren't negotiable :

you're not allowed to play in traffic;

you're not allowed to set fire to the house;

wearing a superman costume is okay, but you're not allowed to climb up on the roof and jump off;

you're not allowed to stick peanuts up your sister's nose.

Maybe that last one was only a rule in our house ... but I think there's probably a reasonably universal application.

So it's not so much the idea that we will be expected to account for our actions that causes me to stumble.

It's the idea of eternal punishment that trips me up. And it trips me up for two reasons.

I've already said in other meditations that I don't believe our Bible teaches that there is a place of perpetual torment for those who are not of the faith. At least not in the sense that some of us were raised to understand it – a lake of fire with everlasting suffering. I'm convinced that a God of love cannot be less merciful than I would be.

But the idea of eternal punishment as presented in this passage also gives me pause because I can't imagine that separating the sheep from the goats is as simple as one might suppose from this metaphor.

If we look first at the sheep, it should be immediately obvious that none of us is able to claim that we have *always* responded positively to needs of the kinds described here. So what is the measure? Do we get to be identified with the sheep if we have done each of these things at least once? Twice? More often than not – i.e. 50% plus 1?

Do we have to have done only one of the things listed to make the cut?

What about the goats?

Can you imagine anyone so bereft of humanity that they haven't at least once lent a helping hand to someone in need? I suppose it's possible, but I have a hard time picturing such a person, though I can easily picture people who have become so incapable of seeing past their own needs that they have become hardened to the needs of others.

So again, the question becomes : does such a person need to be consistently heartless? Heartless at least once? Twice? Heartless more often than not?

I think the point of this metaphor is that our task is to develop the capacity to recognize the image of God in the one who is hungry; the one who is thirsty; the one who is a stranger; the one who is naked; the one who is sick; the one who is a prisoner. And I think the point is that we're expected to respond to that image.

I also think the point of the metaphor is that we can't assume that we know who is in or who is out. Both the sheep *and* the goats are surprised by the terms of judgment.

But judgment there *is* in this metaphor, so maybe at this point I need to address the issue of eternal punishment and eternal life.

Most of the commentators I consulted bemoan the fact that the King James Version translates these phrases as “everlasting punishment” and “eternal life”. They point out that the words translated as “everlasting” and “eternal” are in fact the same word “aionion”.

And they argue that this word, best translated as “eternal” carries a qualitative rather than a quantitative notion. In other words, it's not meant to convey an idea of never-ending punishment or never-ending life, so much as an idea of suffering or life of a certain quality.

Perhaps a quality of existence infused with a deep sense of the presence of God – either a joyous, euphoric existence, or a guilt-ridden, shame-filled sense of alienation. Some commentators would argue that this suffering is redemptive, rehabilitative, with the ultimate goal of reconciling all to God.

I don't know.

What *is* clear from the metaphor is that the judge knows where we all stand, and is able to separate out those who have lived lives worthy of their being called children of God.

But more than that, it would seem that the use of the image of a shepherd separating the sheep from the goats is a deliberate echo of the passage that was read from Ezekiel.

And in *that* passage, we have *this* promise from God : “... I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are

among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered ... I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak ...”

“... I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed ...”

And *that* passage, in its turn, is an echo from the prophet Isaiah, a passage that is quite familiar in this lead up to the Advent season, because Handel chose to include it in his “Messiah” :

“... All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way ...”

We're *all* lost.

Not in the sense that we're all doomed, but in the sense that we're all struggling to find our way through the darkness that sometimes surrounds us. And, if we have a conscience, we're all looking for light, and a sense that we're moving in the right direction.

Part of the beauty of the Ezekiel passage is that the sheep being sought out by God are not the sheep of the Matthew passage. God is not looking for those who have done well. If you read the earlier passages that form the introduction to what was read this morning, you'll discover that the sheep of the Ezekiel passage are more closely related to the objects of care mentioned in the Matthew passage than to the ones offering care. Ezekiel is telling Israel that God is looking for the one who is hungry; the one who is thirsty; the one who is a stranger; the one who is naked; the one who is sick; the one who is a prisoner.

So, I think implicit in the Matthew passage is the notion that we *are* all lost and trying to find our way. We're *all* sometimes in need of help. We're *all* sometimes capable of offering help. We're *all* sometimes guilty of not offering help when we could have done.

But in these echoes from Ezekiel, we're also told that we're not alone as we thrash about in this darkness. For one thing, we're in this together.

But for another thing, we're told that God is *looking* for us : “I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out ... I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak ...”