

Today's scripture reading is the last lesson from Matthew before Jesus' betrayal. In some of my texts for this reading, the lesson is referred to as the "Surprise Judgment". I found that interesting. Why is it referred to as the surprise judgment?

Matthew is telling us the parable and compares Jesus to a shepherd and not an official. He is speaking to the people of his time in a way that they could relate to his story. Nowadays, there are not many shepherds and the idea is partially lost. We understand that a shepherd is a caretaker and provider, but do we fully appreciate what that means?

The shepherd isn't simply following the sheep. He isn't just making certain that they go between fields where there is plenty of grass and water. He takes care of the herd like they are his own children. I realize that the shepherd analogy is used throughout the bible to teach us how the Lord protects and provides for us.

Psalms 23 is easily one of the most recognizable psalms. It begins with identifying the Lord as our shepherd. *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters, he restores my soul.* That really says it all.

He guides us and protects us, not just from outside danger but also from ourselves. He takes us to a place where we can drink and rest in peace. I don't know if you remember one of my first sermons, but we spoke about how sometimes the shepherd would break the lamb's leg so that it wouldn't run away. He protects it from itself.

But now the shepherd is no longer taking care of us. Instead he is separating us. He is splitting the sheep from the goats. Why is he doing this? If we have followed him and his teachings, then there should be no reason for him to sort us.

While I was reading this week's scripture, it made me think about the lenten lunches the past couple of weeks. I was thinking about how often we sort ourselves. When we go somewhere new or unfamiliar, we try to group ourselves with people who are similar to us. The lunches are no different.

The first lunch we had there were definite groups established at the various tables. Some were separated by which church you belonged to. Others were split by people that had known each other for quite a while. Last Wednesday at St. John's it was very much the same. The people were not necessarily sitting with the same people as the week before. But, they still sat with people that they were comfortable with.

That is a great opportunity for fellowship and friendship. Right? We have different congregations coming together to receive the word of God. It doesn't matter which church it is in or which minister is speaking. We are all coming together in fellowship. We are the sheep at Jesus' right hand.

Just like here, in this sanctuary. Right? We come to service or confirmation on Sunday, that should put us with the sheep. We sing at choir and come to the lenten dinners, that should assure us our place on the right as well. We do what we think is in the best interest of the church and will assure our place in heaven.

See, that's the catch right there. Why does it assure our place in heaven? Is doing something that we feel comfortable doing enough to guarantee our place? Is doing the absolute minimum enough? And what about our intentions?

When Jesus sorts the sheep from the goats, he isn't separating the saints from the sinners. No, he is separating the sinners from the other sinners. There is no need to separate

out the saints. They've already assured their place in heaven. Just like the sick, the tired, the hungry, and the poor. In the Sermon on the Mount, we know that they are all blessed.

We know that we are all sinners. We know that Jesus died on the cross so that we can be forgiven. The thing that he asks of us is to live the most righteous life that we can. He was made in our shadow and walked among us. He knows what it is like to live as we do. He knows how hard it can be to live a righteous life.

But we've discussed it before. He wants us to do right because it is the right thing to do and not because we think we have to. That is the difference between the sheep and the goats. The sheep do what is right for right's sake and the goats do what is right because they think it is the right thing to do.

That sounds like we are splitting hairs. Do what is right for right's sake or do what is right because it is the right thing to do. What's the difference? In either case, the right thing is getting done. Does it matter why? That is why it is called the "Surprise Judgment". Because it does matter.

When Jesus separates people to his right, they ask him why. And he tells them because they did not know that they were helping him when they were helping others. The sheep were not helping others to help God. They were helping because they were righteous, not because it was easy or because it benefited them, but because it needed to be done.

That was where the people that were separated to the other side were confused. They had helped others. They had done the right thing because it was the right thing to do. They did the right thing because it not only benefited others, but it benefited them. God tells us that if we do the right thing only to get into the kingdom of heaven, then we really aren't doing the right thing. We are only doing something to benefit us.

We don't do the right thing because it is easy. And we don't do it because it benefits us. We do the right thing because it benefits someone else. I get asked frequently how you know the difference. It isn't an easy answer.

Wednesday night's reading was from Paul's letter to the Romans. We talked about how being concerned with matters of the flesh are unimportant, but that matters of the spirit will grant you everlasting life and entrance into the kingdom of heaven. Letting God's love in gives you a feeling that answers the question for you.

When I was in college, I had an overwhelming feeling to drive home. I didn't know why, but I grabbed my roommate and we started driving home. We weren't even halfway to Madrid, and I felt an urge to take a road that I normally wouldn't have driven for a day trip.

It was an old county road that it would have been easy to get stuck behind a tractor for a very long time and lost a lot of time. This stretch of highway had a lot of hills and valleys with a number of blind spots, so it wasn't easy to pass a tractor if I needed to.

We came over a hill, and I saw someone standing in the middle of the road waving us down. I pulled the truck over and saw this massive accident on the other side. This old farmhouse was tucked away behind some trees on the top of one of the hills. Apparently the owners of the house were turning into their driveway and didn't see the oncoming truck that drove into the passenger side of the car.

My roommate and I ran up to the car to see if we could help. My roommate was a trained EMT and I had some first aid training. We thought we would help in any way that we could. My

roommate started working on the driver of the car and I walked around to check on the passenger.

I barely got around the car and I could see a massive pool of blood under the car. I went over to the window and talked with her. I held her hand and I talked to her. Eventually the paramedics arrived. They told me there was nothing they could do for her and that I could go.

I had done the right thing and sat with her until real help got there. The easy thing for me would have been to accept that and leave. But, I didn't. I stayed with her until she passed. That wasn't easy. And it wasn't doing the right thing because it was the right thing to do. It was hard and it was doing what was right because it was right.

When God's spirit fills you, you don't do things because they benefit you. You don't do things because you think you are doing what is in everyone's best interest. You do what is right because you are filled with an unknown desire to help others.

God has already given us what we need to get to the kingdom of heaven. He guides us, he protects us, he provides for us. We only need to accept his love and his spirit and we won't need to worry about the matters of the flesh. He has already accepted us for who we truly are.

God of justice, you have shown yourself in this world in the poor, the hungry, and the needy. Make us willing participants of your grace and generosity, so that when you come again, we will know your face. We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.