

COME YE BLESSED  
Matthew 25: 31-46

Decisions about who to help and when to help them often engage Christians. Some think: “Do I avoid people who are asking for help on street corners? Do I help people through organizations like Halifax Urban Ministries and our Port Orange Pantry? Is it even possible to visit prisoners, or can we just help those recently incarcerated, trying to put their lives back together for society?” Some people I know take Matthew 25 so seriously that they wonder if a needy person might be Jesus himself. I remember hearing this story about Paul McCartney when he was with the Beatles. “In 1967 a man came to his house claiming to be Jesus. McCartney rarely let anyone in, but he knew that many visitors had emotional or mental issues, so he said, ‘Well, you’d better come in then.’ He gave him a cup of tea. Knowing he was soon leaving for a recording session, he said, ‘I knew it probably wasn’t Jesus, but if he is, I’m not going to be the one to turn him away.’” [*The Beatles: Here, There, and Everywhere.*] Does that run through your head too? Do you wonder if the person who approaches you might be Jesus? Last November, a person in the church was in a checkout line and snapped a picture of the man in line in front of her. The man had long smooth brown hair, a flax-colored tunic, and sandals. Who was that? As I said last week, welcome and hospitality were qualities that the people of Israel especially had, that is, unless they thought you were a Samaritan or from some other group. Then their hospitality could turn off like a faucet. There must have been such a reason for Jesus to tell such a clear story about a king gathering sheep on his right hand, and goats on his left. In fact, goats were hearty and independent animals, but sheep were more costly to raise, taking a shepherd’s care. Lamb was featured in the Passover meal and lamb was the costly offering said to pay the price for the sins of God’s people. Sheep were, as Jesus said, on the “right hand.” Today I sang these words from our text adapted by John Prindle Scott: “Then, then shall the King say

unto them upon his right hand: Come ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, ....” This passage from Matthew 25 has long been said to show that there *will* be a Day of Judgment. On that day, the King of kings, the one seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, will look toward the faithful ones who have sometimes been confused or afraid, but who always needed a good shepherd, and he will bless them. Likewise, he will look at those who have been willful, who put their trust in others or who were destructive, and he will withhold his blessing. What a contrast between eternal punishment and eternal life, according to Matthew 25:46. The goats were, figuratively or literally speaking, on the left hand of the King. Such imagery makes its way through the Bible. It was a source of great consternation to Joseph in Genesis, that his father Jacob, when asked to bless his grandsons, took his hands and crossed them, blessing the younger grandson with his right hand, and his older one on the left. You can read about the displeasure of a left-hand blessing in Genesis 48. Left-handers like me might have hoped that Jacob would give a greater blessing to the older son, but he did not. The right hand always wins in the Bible, designated as the hand for blessing and eating, and left hand designated for personal hygiene! David wrote in Psalm 16: “I keep the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.” And the words of our Lord himself, when he was asked if he was the Christ, proclaimed with frightening authority: “I am; and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven!” Being on the right hand of someone meant something then, and in many parts of our world it means something even now. For that reason, I always counsel wedding ushers to escort with their right arm, which is the hand of honor; and I counsel those training for the ministry to offer benedictions and to baptize with their right hand. The left hand might be welcome here, but not in all other cultures. How might our American

policies have changed if we followed the practices and beliefs of other cultures?  
Cultural practices matter.

Your two pastors and your Music Director are each left-handed! Still, I baptize and bless with my right hand. In grade school I used to have to wait for the one or two pairs of “lefty” scissors, so I eventually learned to cut right-handed. I got out of my desk on the opposite side of my classmates in grade school. We live in a right-handed world, as it was in Biblical days. But these days we are not forcing children be right-handed if they are naturally left-handed. There are some famous left-handers in every sport from Tim Tebow to Barry Bonds to Ty Cobb to Phil Mickelson. We have some former left-handed presidents like Gerald Ford, Ronald Reagan, George Herbert Walker Bush, Bill Clinton, and Barak Obama. There were artists like DaVinci and Michelangelo; musicians like Cole Porter and Paul McCartney; and leaders such as Julius Caesar and Alexander the Great. America has stopped labeling left-handedness as something that needs to be corrected. But in many cultures, *the right hand is the hand is used for blessing and eating, and the left hand is the hand for dirty work and personal hygiene*. In the Middle East even today, where water is scarce and hand sanitizer is not always available, many people use their left hand for working around germs, their right hand for eating and blessing. It was that way ages ago as it is today.

The Apostles’ Creed affirms that Jesus “ascended into Heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty.” Peter also told the crowd on Pentecost that Jesus was “exalted at the right hand of God.” Just before Stephen was stoned to death in Acts 7, he said “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” And in Romans 8, Paul declares, “Is it Christ Jesus who

died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God who intercedes for us?”

So today, the sheep are at the right hand of the king, the goats at the left. Sheep are not brilliant animals, *but they are ones that are wholly dependent on a Good Shepherd. The faithful people are said to be like sheep. The shepherd takes care of his sheep.* Goats-literally on the other hand- wander, stir up trouble, eat garbage, and can be aggressive.

In learning that, we remember this: The King is looking for those who are faithful as he is faithful. The King is looking for those who follow him, who know they need a Good Shepherd to keep them from straying, one they can count on to know them. The King is also looking for people to feed, to clothe, and offer water to others; who visit those imprisoned. If you are willing to do that, or even get started with parts of it, then this proclamation is for you: “The King shall say unto *you*, upon his right hand: ‘Come ye blessed of my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you.’” Whether you inherit the Kingdom, or end up in the outer darkness, is up to you.

Let us pray: Dear Lord Jesus: your stories, like this one, are so insightful, making us face our own actions. We want you to be our Good Shepherd, but for that, we will need to be dependent on you and will need to follow you, like sheep. Lead us in paths of righteousness and to streams where you still the waters for us. Thank you. Amen.

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