

"The difference between Sheep and Goats ain't all that much sometimes"

By Steve Ramer, Pastor

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Scripture:

Matthew 25:31-46 NRS

31 "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. 32 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, 33 and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

34 Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 35 for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'

37 Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? 38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?'

40 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.'

41 Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; 42 for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.'

44 Then they also will answer, "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?'

45 Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' 46 And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

Sermon:

Thinking about the scripture, what are we: sheeps or goats? We may like to believe that we are always attentive to the presence of Jesus in a homeless person, or someone in prison, or a stranger in trouble. But in reality, helping the homeless and the poor is not always easy and can be quite confusing!

Here's a story that illustrates just how confusing it can be!

The Aroma of Christ

By Ryan Beiler

(from the November-December 2001 issue of *Sojourners*)

"Why don't I -- like Mother Teresa -- see the face of Jesus in the poor? Am I missing something she sees, or have she and Dorothy Day fed me some kind of a line?" — from Not All of Us Are Saints, by David Hilfiker

The first time I met Jesus, he was standing in front of the Sojourners office with his pants at his knees, genitals exposed. It was raining.

(Okay, he'd pronounce his name hay-SOOS -- he was Salvadoran. But why save the punch line for the end, like one of those fuzzy fables about footprints in the sand or inspirational emails that get forwarded to your inbox ad nauseam? You'd have seen it coming anyway -- this is a Good Samaritan meets the Least of These urban parable. An accent mark over the "u" would only confuse the issue.)

My first impulse is not compassion. I want to get this guy-mentally ill or drunk or whatever-covered up and on his way. I dust off my Spanish and diplomatically negotiate the pulling-up of his pants. Upon closer observation it's obvious that he's seriously ill. His face and hands are swollen, and he grimaces in pain as I pull his rain-soaked jeans to his waist.

Just then, my co-worker Rose arrives. I ask, "Does Christ House [a local clinic for the homeless] take walk-ins?" She thinks they do. My car is right there. I decide to take him the few blocks to Christ House, where I hope I can hand him over to professionals.

On the way, I practicar my español. What's your name, where are you from, do you like it better here than El Salvador? He compliments my Spanish. I begin to wonder if this is going to turn out to be one of those stories you read in *Sojourners* -- transforming relationships with the poor and all.

He keeps saying that he doesn't have any money. I tell him he doesn't need money where we're going.

I double park in front of Christ House and tell him to wait while I run in to make sure they'll take him. They can't. They don't take walk-ins. They recommend Columbia Road Health Services, a related ministry a block away. I run back out and pull a U-ie, squinting through my fogged-up windshield for the clinic. I park illegally again, and with great effort help him out of the car and lead him into the waiting room.

He's shivering uncontrollably, and soaking wet. I'm sweating inside my Gore-Tex raincoat. I tell the receptionist what the deal is. We have to wait until a nurse is available to assess his condition. In the meantime I hunt for a legal parking spot.

The nurse decides that he needs to go to the emergency room at D.C. General, and calls for an ambulance. It is at this point that he gives his full name for the nurse's paperwork, revealing that he is in fact "Jesus."

The nurse informs me that I am indeed "very nice" for helping Jesus. She must know about Matthew 25:31-46. Yep, I'm a sheep.

I shake Jesus' hand, bid him "Que Dios le bendiga" (God bless you), and walk out the door, relieved of further responsibility. I don't even have to leave any denarii for further expenses. God bless America.

Upon returning to my car, I notice that it reeks of urine.

Weeks later. On my way to work, I recognize Jesus lying on some steps along 15th Street. I say hi. He asks me for money. I ask what for. I recognize the word "cerveza" in his answer. I tell Jesus it's too early for beer, so I buy him a Minute Maid at the Buy-and-Die, as we affectionately refer to the convenience store down the block. I let him keep the change, even though it will likely help buy a cerveza. He looks a lot better, and says he's not sick anymore. He is still in need of a belt.

After that, I see Jesus around the neighborhood rather frequently. He's often loitering in front of Ercilia's, the Salvadoran restaurant at the end of my block. Sometimes I greet him. Sometimes I avoid him. Once I buy his lunch-to go. I try to talk to him, but between his incoherence and my limited Spanish comprehension, I understand little of what he says. I wonder if I'm supposed to befriend this man, learn his story, maybe become some kind of advocate for him. But what kind of relationship can I have with a 40-something, homeless, alcoholic immigrant from El Salvador? (Note: El Salvador literally means "The Savior.") I speculate, but take no real action on his behalf.

I want to want to have relationships with the marginalized. Many of the books I've read-such as the Bible-recommend it. I already love to travel the world and meet the exotic poor of Latin America and Africa (and then come home), but I have yet to love my neighbors.

So I start volunteering, handing out soup and sandwiches in the Sacred Heart Catholic Church basement. It's a total band-aid ministry, but I want to do something, start somewhere. "Do the work and you'll find the spirit," says Jim Wallis in Faith Works (available now in paperback at independently owned book stores everywhere). Alternate translation: "Fake it 'til you make it."

I volunteer Mondays so as to get it over with early in the week, avoiding interference in my social schedule. I decide to fast every Monday until dinner-so as to experience at least a fraction of the hunger of the clients, and to break my fast on the soup of solidarity. Yep, I'm a real Gandhi.

Sometimes I'm dismayed at the demanding and picky behavior of some of the men and women who come, but I'm getting over my fears and learning a few names. The desserts-muffins and danishes donated by area merchants-are also killer.

The first Mondays I miss at Sacred Heart are Christmas and New Year's. Christmas I'm with my parents in rural Virginia. The week of New Year's I spend camping with friends in the Adirondack Mountains of

upstate New York. We go to considerable expense to be outside during the winter in a place far colder than D.C. Sleeping bags, well-insulated boots, down parkas, Polarfleece, etc. We enjoy battling the elements. (You see where this is going. That beeping sound is a dump truck full of tragic irony, backing up to unload.)

My first day back in D.C., the front page of the Metro section has a story about three homeless people freezing to death over the holidays. Jesus was one of them. He got kicked out of a shelter. Some say he was drunk and belligerent. Others accuse the black shelter staff of racial bias. Both are possible, but either way, there's no room at the inn, or in the "temporary" trailers next to the inn. Jesus dies at Christmastime, three blocks from my house while I'm on vacation.

Unfortunately, there's no tidy lesson or call to action here. I'm not sure how to connect the parabolic dots. This is just what happened.

I still volunteer on Mondays. I know more names and a few more stories. I keep the number for the hypothermia emergency van in my wallet. And the car? I scrubbed with every upholstery-deodorizing powder and spray in the closet, but could never get the odor out completely. I usually can't smell it anymore unless I try, but on sunny days the stuffy heat resurrects an unmistakable stink from the front passenger seat.

The poverty of the inner city is evil, and we betray those caught in its web by romanticizing it or imagining that we-by divesting ourselves of some bits of our privilege-can choose to enter it.... But neither is it possible to live as a privileged person within the world of the very poor without undergoing changes. --David Hilfiker