

Manchester United Methodist Church  
November 20, 2005 - Dr. Carl L. Schenck  
"Sheep or Goats?"  
Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46

We have today two absolutely glorious stories to tell. One is a story of the past. The other is a story of the future.

The story of the past goes back to the year sixteen-nineteen. Somewhere along in the year 1619, a group of religious dissenters in England found themselves to be, in many ways, outcasts from the mainstream of English society. Their religious views and worship practices were not accepted. They began to develop a plan to escape the limitations and the problems that they faced in England by going to what they understood to be the New World. They believed the New World was an uninhabited place. Their plan was, that they would sell their farms, sell their businesses and sell their homes. In the spring of the year, in 1620, they would acquire a ship and they would sail across the Atlantic, early in the spring, to arrive in the part of the North American continent that we call Virginia. They had heard of Virginia's mild climate and fertile soil and they saw the possibility of a new life, what they called it a time when they could express and practice their faith the way they felt called to and become a "city set upon a hill." Spring came in England in 1620 and there were one-hundred-two people committed to make the voyage.

You know what's it's like when you're getting ready to leave on vacation? How you're going to leave at eight o'clock, but it's eight o'clock, and it's nine o'clock, and it's ten o'clock, and somebody's not packed yet, and a few final chores aren't done. Or, if you remember what it's like to move. These folks had vacation and move and all that all wrapped into one. Meaning that somehow they couldn't seem to quite get ready on time. They did, though, finally secure a wooden ship to take them across the Atlantic Ocean. The ship's name was the Speedwell. You think I'm kidding, but it really was called the Speedwell. They loaded everything that they had on the Speedwell and about the middle of July, much later than they had originally intended, they finally pulled out of the harbor in London, and down the Thames, and out into the North Atlantic. They discovered that they had dealt with a dishonest used car salesman. The Speedwell wasn't speedy and it wasn't well. It leaked, and oh did it leak. They discovered that if they staffed the bilge pump twenty-four-seven for all the time they were on the boat, they couldn't keep ahead of the leak. They wouldn't make it across the Atlantic on this old leaky boat and so, they turned around, headed back up the Thames, and back into the harbor in London, where they began to haggle for another boat.

Finally, in early October they finally secured another boat called the Mayflower. It was neither May nor were the flowers blooming. They finally got all their stuff off the leaky Speedwell, onto the Mayflower and headed out, once again, across the North Atlantic. What they then discovered, at the end of their journey, was that their choice of navigator was about as bad as their choice of boats. They landed not in which we now call Virginia, but in Massachusetts.

Now I have endured three Massachusetts winters and I can tell you they're no fun. But for the one hundred and two Pilgrims that landed on November 21, 1620, on Plymouth Rock, they had no home and they had no provisions for the winter. They were totally unprepared for what they were to face. Before spring was to come around again, half of them had died. The ones who did survive only survived because of the hospitality and generosity of the people who were there. People that the Pilgrims thought didn't even exist. The Native American people provided some shelter, and some food, and some training, and then when spring came, for the survivors, a good deal of help in planting their first crop. It's one of those great ironies of history that those who provided the greatest hospitality to the weak

and vulnerable Pilgrims were, generations later, to have their children and grandchildren largely exterminated by the children and grandchildren of the Pilgrims.

By the fall of the year 1621, the coming winter looked very different than the winter before. It looked very different from a winter where they had no shelter, had no grain stored away, had no knowledge of how to hunt the hillsides and so, the governor of the little colony declared a feast day of thanksgiving. And, of course, that becomes the forerunner of this grand holiday that we celebrate this week.

A story of the past, but we have also today a story of the future. We have also today a story told by Jesus long ago about a coming day, a day of the future, a day that is commonly called the day of the last judgment. You know that story just as well as you know the Pilgrim story. In that last judgment story, Jesus said the day will come when the son of man will come in all his glory and he'll divide the sheep from the goats. You know the criteria. You've been preached to about this all of your lives. The sheep will be the folks who fed the hungry, and they gave drink to the thirsty, and clothed the naked, and sheltered the homeless, and all that list of things. The goats will be those who didn't.

What we often miss, though, in this story is that the story, as Jesus tells it, and anticipates it, is not a story about how we each individually do those things. Jesus' story does not say, when the son of man comes in all his glory he will divide individual sheep from goats, no, what does he say? He says he will divide the nations. The judgment will be, according to this story, not so much individual, but corporate. It will be about how we did as a whole, not so much about how each of us, individually did. The Son of man will divide the nations, the story says, as a shepherd divides sheep from the goats.

Our Thanksgiving is a good time to reflect on this sheep and goats business and where we may stand personally and corporately. We like to think of ourselves as sheep and in many respects, that's good. That's correct. It is well known and we're often justly proud of the generosity of Americans when there are tragedies around the world. But what we sometimes forget is that it's relatively easy to be generous when you have the largest economy on the face of the earth. It is also just as true that if you look by size of economy, by the size of the resources available, there are a lot of nations that are much more generous than we are. So it's hard to tell really – sheep. . . goats . . . which is it?

You know, for those of us in the church of Jesus Christ there are a couple of strategies for being sheep. One very important strategy is the strategy of charity and generosity, and we are exercising that in many ways today. Many of you brought a turkey to church. It may have been a frozen one, or it may have been a family member! You display much generosity. Our freezer capacity was full by 8:30 this morning and the turkeys were still coming in. One way in which we do "sheep work" is by our generosity, by our charity. It's vital, and it's important, and it's godly, and it's blessed, but it's only one of the ways.

There are two ways that we're called to be sheep. Those who feed the hungry and clothe the naked and on and on. The first way is charity, the second way is justice. The ideal world is not a world where some people are generous to help those in need. The ideal world is where the world is just and no one is in need. Kellee Sikes, the head of our Social Justice Ministry, has a wonderful story that she likes to tell that illustrates the difference between charity and justice. In her story imagine you're a person by the side of a river and there comes a baby down the river floating in a basket. You rescue the baby from the river. You take the baby into your home, you feed it, you clothe it, you change its diapers. You bring it into, and make it a part of, your family. You have done a great-hearted work of charity, of generosity.

Then a few weeks later, you happen to be by the river and another baby comes down the

river in a basket and you rescue it and take it home. Then not long after, you find yet another baby coming down the river and you begin to understand that it is not enough just to rescue babies from the river. You've got to go upstream and find out why they're in the river in the first place. Changing the conditions that put the babies in the river is the work of justice.

Charity . . . justice . . . both are a part of our calling if we're to be the sheep and not the goats. We have today, of course, an absolutely painless and wonderful way to practice justice, in the Fair Trade Market. The very principle of fair trade guarantees that the producer in the developing world receives a fair wage; a living wage for the production of the handicrafts. We have a thrilling, wonderful opportunity to buy to our heart's content and in so doing, exercise justice as we buy through organizations that practice fair trade. Fair to the producer in the third world.

Sheep or goats . . . the last judgment, Jesus said, people will be judged not by how hard they prayed, or how many times they came to church, but whether or not they practiced charity and justice. Whether or not they fed the hungry, and clothed the naked, and visited the imprisoned. That's the Jesus standard. That's the measuring line that separates the sheep from the goats. It is our job as the church of Jesus Christ in this Thanksgiving season, to join and lead the nation in celebrating the abundance that God has given us and to join in providing the challenge of Jesus to our nation. We tell to ourselves and to our nation the story of the standard of Jesus' judgment. Sheep or goats?