

## INHERIT THE KINGDOM

A shepherd was keeping watch over his flock one day when a black BMW came down the road next to his pasture. The car stopped, and a young man in a Gucci suit jumped out and headed over to the shepherd.

“Sir,” he said, “if I can tell you exactly how many sheep you have in your herd, will you let me have one?”

The shepherd shrugged and said, “OK.”

The young man pulled out his laptop computer, got hooked up with the satellites overhead, entered a few bits of data, and then watched as a 50-page report spit out on the printer he had in his back seat. Looking at the last result on the last page, the young man confidently announced, “You have exactly 387 sheep.”

“That’s right,” the shepherd said. He watched as the young man triumphantly strode into the middle of the flock, picked up an animal, and placed it in his back seat. But as the man started to open the front door, the shepherd said, “I can tell you exactly what your occupation is if you’ll let me have my sheep back.”

When the young man said, “OK,” the shepherd said without hesitation, “You are a government consultant.”

The shocked young man asked, “How did you know that?”

“Easy,” the shepherd said. “First of all, you show up where you weren’t invited. Second, you expect me to pay for information I already possess. And third, you don’t know the first thing about sheep. Now, get my dog out of your car.”

Most of us today are like that government consultant: we don’t know a whole lot about sheep. And that’s a shame, because sheep are one of the richest themes in the Bible.

Jacob, Moses and of course King David all spent time as shepherds. We cherish the very familiar words of Psalm 23, “The Lord is my shepherd.” When Jesus is born in Bethlehem, the first people to hear the news was not the kings, the rabbis or the high priest; it was a group of shepherds on a nearby hill.

And Jesus himself used sheep frequently in his stories: The lost sheep; the Good Shepherd; and today’s parable about final judgment. And even if we know little about sheep, the good news today is that we can easily do what it takes to be counted as a sheep.

This parable told in Matthew is one that doesn’t need a lot of explanation. When final judgment comes, Jesus will sit on the throne designating him as the king that he is. And to him comes the responsibility of separating the sheep from the goats – those who have done God’s will from those who have not.

And what is the standard of judgment Jesus uses? It has nothing to do with the knowledge we’ve amassed, the fame or human praise we have acquired, or the fortune we have gained. We don’t even hear that a confession of faith is part of the equation. No, in this story, we are told that Jesus will judge us by our response to a fellow human being in need.

Isn’t that a wonderful thing? Think how limited that group of sheep would be if we were required to have a certain level of education, or a certain income, or the ability to preach like Billy Graham. Many if not all of us would fall short if that were the standard used.

Instead, the measure of what we need to do is to feed a hungry person; give water to a thirsty soul; show hospitality to a stranger; provide clothing to someone who is going without; and visit a person who is sick or in jail. Those are some very doable and attainable goals, any day of the week. All of these acts are a witness to the world of the love of God when we act on that love to our neighbors in need.

Those who attended our Church Conference last week may remember that our District Superintendent David Hills brought special attention to the fact that since 2008, a part of our membership vow is that we pledge to be a witness. David noted that we can fulfill the other four areas of our vows – our prayers, our presence, our gifts and our service – comfortably within the walls of this building. But when we are a witness, we have to do so outside of here.

How do we feel about that word “witness?” Maybe we shrink away from it because all of us have been confronted by well-meaning but badly behaving witnesses who knock on our doors and then tell us all about the wrong things we are doing or being. Or maybe we would like to be able to eloquently tell others about our faith, but find ourselves tongue-tied or at a loss of how to explain what we believe.

But Jesus says there’s an even greater need for a different kind of witness: A witness in the way we act toward one in need. And God is very pleased when we do what we can to reach the least, the last and the lost.

But did you notice how surprised the sheep were when they are honored by Jesus? “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger, and gather you to us? Or naked and clothed you? When did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?”

In other words, those rewarded didn’t think at the time that they were helping someone that in fact it was Christ and therefore they were racking up brownie points. They helped simply because they couldn’t stop themselves. It was a natural, instinctive action of the heart.

On the other hand, those who had failed to help say, “When did we see you hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, ill or in prison?” What they are really saying is, “Lord, if we had known it was *you*, we would gladly have helped. We just thought it was some common person.”

A few years ago, a pastor was driving home when he passed a broken-down bus loaded with teenagers. Two or three adults stood in front of the bus looking under the hood. The pastor stopped and learned they were a church young group heading home from a work project in the southern part of the country. It was late and they were still a hundred miles from home.

So the pastor took the kids a carload at a time to his nearby church. He let each person call home to explain to family that they had an unexpected problem, and would not be home until the bus was fixed. The pastor also found a store that was open and bought doughnuts and soft drinks for the entire group. The kids had their sleeping bags from the trip, and so all found places to sleep in the church overnight.

The next morning, a mechanic was found to fix the bus, and the group was soon ready to head home. And as they pulled out of the church parking lot, the man in charge of the kids called back to the pastor, “We are so grateful to God for taking care of us.”

And the pastor had to admit his first response was to reply, “What about me? I was the one who took care of you!”

That’s not the attitude of the sheep that are commended. We are to be open to one another’s needs and unselfish in our help. There should be a sense of sacrifice in what we do, but it should not be for the sake of recognition for that act that we reach out to help in the first place.

This is the perfect time of the year for this sermon because Thanksgiving and soon Christmas will be upon us. And here is the homework for you:

Consider who would be alone or hungry this Thursday, and then invite them to join you for dinner – particularly if you know it is someone who cannot repay the favor. Consider the Gifts for Kids and buy a present for someone who otherwise will have nothing under their tree.

Consider visiting someone in the nursing home who has no family, or visit someone who has been in the news as being incarcerated this past year.

Do these things without telling a soul, and Jesus indeed will be smiling on us on Judgment Day as he names us as his sheep. And not only will we be able to inherit the kingdom of God – we will begin to create God’s kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.