

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on November 26, 2017 (Christ the King)

There are certain children's toys that make me feel incredibly smart. One of these is the shape sorter. You remember that one. It has simple shapes in primary colors like blue circles and red triangles and green squares. Placing the correct shape in the correct slot triggers a sense of great triumph and glee in the child while unleashing unsurpassed affirmation from mom and dad, aunts and uncles, and everyone else who has gathered to watch the scene unfold on the living room floor.

It's used as a tool to teach young children shapes, colors, and fine motor skills but as I watch a child struggle and ultimately conquer the shape sorter, I sometimes think to myself. "Big deal. I can do that in my sleep. No one's clapping for *me*." But seriously, I am *really good* at sorting shapes.

There is some sorting going on in this morning's gospel passage from Matthew and it's a bit trickier than a child's toy. Jesus talks about the coming end of the age when all of humanity will be sorted and separated one from another "as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats." It's a disturbing image for those of us who like to imagine that, ultimately, we're all headed to the same place. That we will all share in the heavenly banquet. So this kind of sorting gives us pause. We don't want anything to do with being sorted, for fear of ending up in the wrong pile.

And yet, ironically enough, we love sorting *other* people. We sort them into social classes and tax brackets; we sort them by ethnic group and skin color; we sort them by class rank and education level. We like to put people into buckets because it's easier to judge them that way. That's really why we put so much energy into sorting others — it makes us feel better about ourselves.

And you need look no further than the church itself. If we want our parishes to reflect the wideness of God's mercy and the diversity of God's kingdom here on earth, we're not very good at including all sorts and conditions of people. If you don't look a certain way or believe a certain way or act a certain way, you won't fit in. So you end up with churches filled exclusively with red rectangles in one neighborhood and ones filled only with blue circles in another. And you know from that child's toy that no matter how hard you try, unless the shape fits the correct hole, it won't get inside. That red rectangle just won't go into the circular hole. Surely this is not the sorting God has in mind. A sorting that minimizes and marginalizes God's creation.

The thing is, when it comes to sorting, we like to be the *sorters* not the *sortees*. But of course we are not the sorters. Separating people into groups and judging them is not a human function or role. It's above our pay grade. And that's a good thing because we're pretty lousy at it. Though not for lack of trying.

But what about this whole notion of divine judgment? We want to think about God as a uniter, not a divider. We want to think about God bringing people of all different backgrounds together, not putting them through some sort of celestial strainer where the good ones go in one pile while the bad ones end up in another. What about that “amazing grace” we like to sing about? Or the “unconditional love” preachers always talk about?

Well, this *is* a parable about judgment. And we can't shy away from that, even if it makes us uncomfortable. But it is a judgment rooted in mercy. A judgment based upon serving the least of these. A judgment established in seeking and serving Christ in all persons.

And at one level this sorting to which we submit is easy. There's a litmus test for whether you're a sheep or a goat. You're a sheep if you have fed the hungry, provided drink for the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, tended to the sick, and visited the prisoner. If you haven't, you're a goat. Sorry you weren't a better person; good luck with your eternal punishment.

But what about those of us who have at times fed the hungry, but at other times failed to feed the hungry? What about those of us who have at times welcomed the stranger, but at other times failed to welcome the stranger? What about those of us who have at times tended the sick, but at other times failed to tend the sick? What about those of us who, in other words, are not perfect? Those of us who are human? Those of us who strive to follow Jesus in word and deed, but fall short? If perfection is the criteria, we can all cash in our goat chips and prepare for a bitter end.

The reality is that we are all hybrids — some combination of sheep and goat. We're all Shoats or Geep or whatever the term would be. We have all followed in Jesus' path and we have all stumbled along the way. The good news is that Jesus continually invites us to get up and try again. Jesus continually extends the invitation and offers us opportunities to serve the lost, the lonely, and the least. Those on the margins don't need our sorting and our judgment, they need our love. The same love that Jesus offers all of us is what he expects us to show to others, by feeding and welcoming and clothing and visiting.

In our temptation to sort others, we sometimes forget that we, too, at times, are the lost, the lonely, and the least. Look at the words of the prophet Ezekiel: “For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. I will rescue them...I will feed them...I will seek the lost...I will bring back the strayed...I will bind up the injured...I will strengthen the weak.” We have all strayed like lost sheep and yet God seeks us out and binds us up; God rescues us and strengthens us. And there is comfort in that.

Just as there is comfort in knowing that we are more than individual shapes in primary colors to God. We are more than sheep and goats. We are complex kaleidoscopes of humanity. Some aspects of our lives will be separated and judged, others will be affirmed and anointed. With God's help, we will continue to be shaped and formed in God's image. And with God's help, we can let go of the sorting we do to others and focus instead on serving them in Christ's name.