

When Pastors Steve and Tasha asked me to preach to the congregation they serve, I was really excited. The opportunity to preach in Scotland is not something that occurs very often in my life. When I looked at the lectionary readings for today I was even more happy. Because one of the few things my American self knows about Scotland is that the sheep outnumber the people. One of the other things I know about Scotland is that the accents of your country are a lot more enjoyable than the flat accents of my own, but if you can understand Pastor Steve's southern drawl you can hopefully understand my own northern accent even if I slur a little bit because I'm deaf.

All that to say, I am really thrilled to join with you today to worship our Lord Jesus Christ and to learn together what it means to be His Body on earth, from Portland Oregon and Largs Scotland.

This week's readings come from Matthew and Ezekiel and are intentionally lined up to show the continuation of the metaphor and prophecy.

I'm going to start by reading Ezekiel. We are in chapter 34. Ezekiel is about 2/3 of the way through the Old Testament, after Lamentations and before Daniel.

Ezekiel 34 and it starts at verse 11. While you're finding that, I want to tell you just a little bit about the context of Ezekiel. The book is named Ezekiel because it

contains the prophecies declared by Ezekiel. Ezekiel prophesied the fall of his own nation and the destruction of the Temple. And then when the Babylonians conquered them and took the educated and the artists and the priests, Ezekiel was among them. It was under Babylonian rule that he began to prophesy again.

These verses today are part of the prophesy that came during the Babylonian rule. The Temple, the center of all Jewish worship, has been destroyed. All the consequences prophesied to | a nation of injustice had already been poured out on them. Now Ezekiel began to preach hope. So here we are in Chapter 34, verse 11

For thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out.

34:12 As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness.

34:13 I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land.

34:14 I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall

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feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel.

34:15 I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD.

34:16 I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

We're going to skip down to verse 20

34:20 Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep.

34:21 Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide,

34:22 I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep.

34:23 I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd.

34:24 And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken.

In Ezekiel the prophet tells of the return of David, the regathering of God's people. And when they are gathered, God will separate the well fed from the thin, the strong from the weak. Not to reward the well fed but to uplift the weak and punish those who had taken advantage and pushed down their brothers and sisters so that they would be fine. To pour justice out on the ones who looked out for themselves and their own families under a cruel rule instead of looking out for all God's people.

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In Matthew, the perspective changes just a little. But as I am sure most of you have experienced, just a subtle shift in perspective can change everything. Here we are in chapter 25. Matthew is the very first book of the New Testament, the first of the gospels. So chapter 25, beginning in verse 31.

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, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ ³⁷Then 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? ³⁸And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ ⁴⁰And 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.’ ⁴¹Then 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; ⁴²for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³I 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.’ ⁴⁴Then 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?’ ⁴⁵Then 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.’ ⁴⁶And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Here we see a different separation. In Ezekiel, the new David is judging the sheep against sheep and separating them by the evidence of their behaviour. At all the sheep still maintain their identity as sheep. Now in Matthew, the sheep and the goats are separated. Two species – now, the very essence of who they are, what they are, is different. No longer can those who butt with their horns at the sheep, who scatter them and mistreat them be called sheep, be called the people of God.

I have a friend who is a pastor in the Northeast United States. We're on opposite sides of the country, but we have shared experiences and a shared love for Jesus that really bind us together. He is a Methodist pastor who was assigned to pastor two small churches that are only 1.5 miles apart. One church is full of members who are joyful, generous, and gather frequently. They often talk about ways to give to the community and how to help those around them with their limited means. The other church, just 2.5 kilometres away, complains about everything. Single. Thing. Nothing is to their standards. Nothing about the pastor, the church, the sermons, the neighborhood. Everything is wrong and it's all my friend's fault, even their frustration and unwillingness to meet for prayer is somehow his fault. And my friend is deeply, deeply grieved by this.

He loves the congregations equally, even if we can all assume he doesn't like them the same. He loves the neighborhoods and wants them to be served well. He puts passion and study and work into every sermon, into making sure he teaches well, encourages well, and calls people to a life of love and sacrifice for a larger good well. And one church treats him like a member of the family and one treats him, well, like that member of the family you hope doesn't show up to Christmas dinner.

How can two groups of people that are of similar demographics, similar location, and the same faith be so completely different?

I would argue, based on these passages, that they are not of the same faith at all.

There are a lot of people who claim Jesus as Lord. They claim the name Christian and they disagree on doctrine and interpretation and rules. Catholic and Eastern churches and the wide variety of Protestant churches have very different flavors of Christianity, but they share one faith in one God through one person, Jesus the Christ.

But there are a lot of people who say "Jesus is Lord!" and then they push around those who are weaker, they ignore the hungry, they don't care for the ill, or in the modern case they don't help keep people from getting ill. Their energy is spent

worrying about money and gains and their own little unit, their own little congregation, their own group, instead of recognizing that the call of Jesus is to be saved from those worries and instead care for those around us with that same sense of passion and urgency. We are called to more than this grasping, pushing, ramming.

When Jesus came, he changed what it meant to be the people of God. The chosen of God had been covered under the covenant God made with Abraham. They were sheep because they were born sheep or adopted into the flock. And the temple was rebuilt, and Jesus came and fulfilled the Law that was the covenant. Now, there is a new covenant. There is a new agreement made not through Abraham or David, but through Jesus of Nazareth, fully man and fully God. And this covenant no longer requires special food or circumcision or special planting and fabrics to set us apart. Instead, what sets us apart is our love. Our side of the deal is accepting the deal that Jesus already made, accepting that Jesus stood as our representative before God, stood as our representative before man, and took the punishment of man for our sins and the blessing of God for his holiness. And that holiness is shared with us. We are filled with the Spirit that is the same in every bit of nature as Jesus, as the Creator, the third person of the one Godhead. And that Spirit has the power to transform us – not into something weird and

unrecognizable, but into the people we were always intended to be – full of love, hope, and joy.

And when you are full of love, hope, and joy and full of the same Spirit that was willing to suffer the punishment for someone else's sins, when you look at your fellow humans what you feel is compassion and love. And that's what makes a Christian truly live up to the meaning of that word – Christ like. It's not rules or voting or the right sermons or the right prayers or the right anything. It's caring for the sick, visiting those in prison, feeding those who are hungry (without forcing them to prove their worthiness first). It is about seeing the humanity even in the most depraved of us, the possibility for hope in their lives and reaching out to that bit of them without ignoring all the "icky" stuff you do not like.

As I said at the beginning, I do not know a lot about Scotland. I know less about Largs. I do not know what your daily troubles are, what memories November brings to mind. I do not know what feuds bubble in your town or what history impacts your relationships and worries. But I do know that despite the distance, and our accents, between us, we share the experience of being human. We share a desire for a life that means something more than some paid bills. We share a love for a Jewish dude from Nazareth who did not look very special and

sometimes was rude and who didn't always behave in the most pleasing way but who loved people deeply and saw the possibility for who they were meant to be, who had the power to reach in and change them so that they could enjoy a life of hope even in the face of horror.

I know that whether you're a highland sheep or a scraggly important sheep in Portland – when the Lord returns and gathers his flock, we will be counted together. And it is my hope that because of our love for each other, others will see the beauty of our God and turn from their selfish ways and into the loving open arms of Christ just as we have.

A Psalm of David.

¹The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

2 He makes me lie down in green pastures;

he leads me beside still waters;

3 he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths

for his name's sake.

⁴Even though I walk through the darkest valley,

I fear no evil;

for you are with me;

your rod and your staff—

they comfort me.

⁵ You prepare a table before me

in the presence of my enemies;

you anoint my head with oil;

my cup overflows.

⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me

all the days of my life,

and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD

MY WHOLE LIFE LONG.

Lord God,

you have given us the gift of freedom, of love, and of salvation. You have justified us and restored us to right relationship. You have adopted us into your family and filled us with your Spirit. Lord God, help us to see those who are overlooked, forgotten, ignored, and despised. Help us to see you in those we would not touch. Forgive us for our disgust, cleanse us of our pride. And give us the power to act, even in the smallest of ways – by seeing, by loving, and by serving that we might

build your Kingdom on earth. Lord God, may we see every opportunity to serve others as a chance to serve you, the one who suffered, the one who healed, and the one who saved. Lord God, open our hearts to the hungry, the poor, the imprisoned, the sick, and the scared. May we truly be your body, willing to suffer and willing to act for others.

Pope Francis said you pray for the hungry then you feed the hungry. This is how prayer works. May this be our prayer, oh, Lord. For your glory.

Amen