

STORIES THAT SHAPE US

PARABLES OF JESUS

“SHEEP, GOATS, AND
CONGREGATION
VITALITY”

Pastor Charlie Berthoud

Sunday, May 25, 2025

“Sheep, Goats, and Congregational Vitality” | Matthew 25:31-46 | Pastor Charlie Berthoud

We are continuing our Stories That Shape Us series, on the parables of Jesus, with our focus today on the parable of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25.

Reading Matthew, it's important to remember that Jesus is presented as a teacher, and that there are five teaching sections through the gospel.

The Sermon on the Mount

Matthew 5-7

Missionary Instructions

Matthew 10

Parables of the Kingdom

Matthew 13

Living in Community

Matthew 18

The End Time

Matthew 24-25

Our reading comes from the final section, which includes several distinct teachings about being faithful and responsible while waiting and hoping for the Son of Man to return.

The teaching today echoes the teaching at the end of the Sermon on Mount, where Jesus talks about wise and foolish builders, emphasizing the importance of putting words into practice.

Today's reading provides us with a good to remember that we can read any part of scripture in isolation. By itself today's reading would suggest that we earn our salvation with good works, while the strong witness in the rest of scripture teaches us about God's gracious gift of salvation.

Another interesting aspect of today's reading is the many different descriptions of Jesus, including: Son of Man, King, Lord, Shepherd.

It's interesting to notice the repetition in today's reading. The same six deeds are each mentioned four times. Clearly they are important.

We often hear that Jesus cared for the lost, the last, and the least. He told parables about lost coin and lost sheep, he said the last will be first, and in Matthew 25, he talks about the least.

And finally it's worth noting that this fifth and final section of teaching is about what to do while waiting for Jesus to return, the text tells us that he is already present.

Listen for God's word.

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 who 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 brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.’ ⁴¹ Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You who 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.”

So, you're driving home and stop at a red light at a busy intersection. Someone is there with a sign and a cup, asking for money for food. Maybe you give them a few dollars, maybe don't. Next day a different person at the same light. Next day, again. You can

afford to give them some money, but you hesitate, especially when you see people at the other three medians at the intersection.

What do you do?

And what do you do when this happens right after you here the words of Jesus: “I was hungry and you gave me something to eat”?

It’s a common and challenging problem. I lived in New York City for four years, and I remember the challenge of walking from the subway at 116th Street to Union Theological Seminary at 120th, where it was typical to have several people ask for money for food.

“I was hungry and you gave me something to eat.”

There are no easy answers.

Sometimes we need to take care of immediate needs, and sometimes we need to dig deeper and think about solutions. So concretely that means that sometimes we help with give money or food to the individual, and sometimes we don’t give to the individual but contribute to a food bank, or a homelessness agency.



Reflecting on another Bible story will help.

A couple weeks, we heard the parable of the Good Samaritan from Luke 10, We even acted it out for you.

It’s the story Jesus told about how two religious leaders ignored a person in need, and the Samaritan—the foreigner, the immigrant—was the one who stopped to help.

Over the years, theologians and church people have pondered this parable, wondering about what would happen if the Samaritan found someone else beaten up on the roadside on the next day, and again the day after that.

If the problem persisted, it would make sense for the Samaritan and the religious leaders to go up the road and start asking some questions:

- Do we need better lighting on this road?
- Do we need a stronger police presence on this road?
- Are weapons too easily available?
- Do we need more jobs and opportunities for people in the nearby communities?
- Do we need to invest more in our schools?

This kind of digging deeper is important.

Charity and caring for immediate needs are vitally important, but not enough. We also have to look at root causes.

Fast forward to mid-late 20th century in Latin America, where countries were torn apart by huge extremes of wealth and poverty, where lots of people were hungry, and where alliances among political military and economic leaders resulted in dictatorships, where any dissent was squashed with arrests, torture, and death.

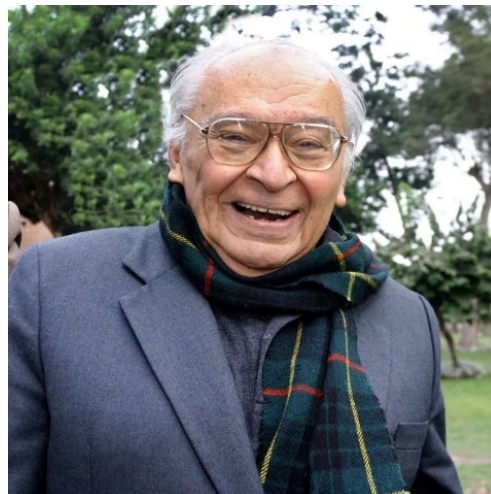
In that context, the church started asking moving beyond charity and asking questions.



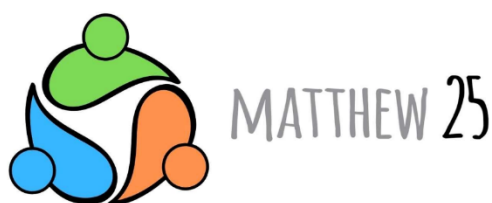
They started wondering about the root causes of poverty and about why so many people were being disappeared and killed. The entrenched interests didn't appreciate the questions from the church. They criticized the church for "getting involved in politics."

Brazilian archbishop Dom Hélder Câmara, famously said:
"When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist."

A Peruvian priest named Gustavo Gutierrez coined the term “structural sin” and was instrumental in the development of liberation theology, with its focus on “institutionalized violence” and “the preferential option for the poor.” In the 1960s and 70s, church leaders wrote some groundbreaking and courageous documents using this new language and framework, calling for substantive socioeconomic changes, seeking to provide an environment where all people might flourish, in the spirit of what Jesus taught about God’s kingdom coming to earth.



Our denomination, the Presbyterian Church USA has a good and long history of asking questions and trying to get to root causes of issues that lead to human suffering. The latest manifestation of this is the Matthew 25 initiative.



Rooted in Jesus’ teachings from the Gospel of Matthew chapter 25, this transformative movement calls on congregations in the Presbyterian Church (USA) [PC(USA)] to live out the church’s mission through bold and compassionate discipleship.

‘TRULY I TELL YOU, JUST AS YOU DID IT TO ONE OF THE LEAST OF THESE SIBLINGS OF MINE, YOU DID IT TO ME.’ MATTHEW 25:40

We signed on to the initiative several years ago, and just this week we launched our Matthew 25 bulletin board in Bradfield Hall.

The initiative has three primary pillars:

- Building congregational vitality
- Dismantling structural racism
- Eradicating systemic poverty

The second and third pillars are challenging—as both of them move beyond charity into root causes. It’s a lot easier to post a Martin Luther King quote on Facebook or to say “I have a Black friend” than it is to even begin to “dismantle structural racism.”

And it’s a lot easier to donate to the food bank or give a few dollars to someone at an intersection than it is to even begin exploring what it means to “eradicate systemic poverty.”

Here at Covenant we’ve started to do the hard work, and I’m grateful for our progress so far.



We have a long history of engaging with racial justice issues. In March 1965, four Covenant members went to Alabama, to join the Freedom march from Selma to Montgomery.

Thirty years ago, thanks to the leadership of Pastor Emeritus Bill King, Covenant was an early supporter of Project Nehemiah led by Rev Alex Gee.

More recently, we have had dozens of people who have taken the Black History for a New Day class from Project Nehemiah. One of their refrains is that we collectively teach our children to not be racist.

And we have an ongoing group here at church called Racist Anonymous, who are using the 12 step model to wrestle with racism, with the hope of not just learning but actually changing.



As for poverty issues, there is a long and good history of being charitable, and we are increasingly learning to wrestle with the systemic issues. Our Guatemala partnership is focused on education, empower students there for a better future, and on helping us to understand and engage with complicated issues like poverty and immigration.

In recent years, our middle school students have learned about housing here in Madison, and they led an effort for our church to raise \$10,000 for a Tiny House downtown.

This year our Mission Committee is leading our congregation in an emphasis on hunger, with support for partners that feed hungry people and work at root causes.

We listen to people like Matthew Desmond, who writes about poverty and encourages Christians to simply hate poverty more and become poverty abolitionists. He writes:

“Poverty abolitionists do the difficult thing. They donate to worthy organizations, yes, but they must do more. If charity were enough, well, it would be enough.”

These are just a few of the examples of how we’ve begun working on the daunting tasks of dismantling structural racism and eradicating systemic poverty. We’re LEARNING about racism and poverty so we can contribute in the hard work of dismantling and eradicating.

When I first learned about the Matthew 25 initiative and the three pillars, it seemed to me that mixing the dismantling of racism and the eradication of poverty with “enhancing congregational vitality” was an odd mix.

But now I understand how they go together. When we take seriously the teachings of Jesus and the Bible about loving neighbors, about tearing down boundaries, about everyone being a beloved child of God, about feeding hungry people, and so on.

I sense that this brings vitality, that it wakes us up to the reality that following Jesus is indeed about engaging with racism and poverty and other troubles in the world.

Asking these questions about these complicated issues is a large part of the vitality that we experience here at Covenant, as we seek to authentically follow Jesus and work for the Kingdom that he proclaimed.

Wresting with racism and poverty make our faith and our church more real, more grounded, more vital—as we’re actually putting the prayer into practice: thy Kingdom come, thy will be done.

Doing this hard work on root causes of poverty and racism is vital in our world, and especially in our country today:

- with draconian budget cuts to programs that help to feed hungry people,
- with history books being rewritten to downplay the struggles and accomplishments of Black and brown people,

- with the prospect of millions of people losing basic healthcare health care coverage, and
- with legitimate concerns about the future of our democracy.

These are not simple issues, and no political party has a monopoly on truth. We need to be careful about pointing fingers at “those” people, as there a little sheep and a little goat in all of us. We need to work together.

But that’s hard right now. The broad consensus that previously valued programs that provide food and health care, and common decency, along with appreciation for the history and contributions of our diverse population, along with the checks and balances of democracy... That consensus is gone.

Understandably we’re weary, sometimes exhausted.

In our exhaustion, our fear, our frustration, we need to stick together. We need to pray. We need to sing. We need to stay rooted in God’s word.

This is a time for us to together find new vitality in following Jesus.

So as a Christian in the world today, I’m really glad to be part of a church that engages with racism and poverty through the Matthew 25 initiative.

I’m glad to be part of a congregation that is actively praying for wisdom and courage for the living of these days.

And I’m glad to be part of congregation that is trying to take seriously the call of Jesus to love neighbors, to seek God’ kingdom, and to feed hungry people.

Let us pray ...