



## Don't Be a Goat!

TEXT  
Matthew 25:31-45

September 25, 2016 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

I have learned from older saints in my life that when we come to that place where we know our time here is limited, we pay more attention to saying what is important to say. I wonder if Jesus felt that way. This is the last story that Jesus tells before the events leading to his crucifixion.

It's an unsettling passage. The Son of Man divides the nations. It includes one of the few references in scripture to punishment being eternal. There is no mention of belief in Jesus Christ distinguishing sheep from goat. It's about the least of these. At the end of his ministry, what matters most is the least of these.

The thing that sheep and goats share in the story is that neither of them saw Jesus. *When did we see you?* they asked. What distinguishes them is that sheep see people. Goats never do. Don't be a goat.

This story of Jesus calls his followers to pay attention to those on the bottom — to see them. *When I was hungry, you fed me. When I was thirsty, you gave me drink. When I was in prison, you visited me. You treated me like a human being, even when life's circumstances treated me otherwise.* Those who, by circumstance or by their

own choices or by consequences resulting from the choices of others, find themselves on the bottom, we are to see them.

One of my favorite novels is Barbara Kingsolver's *Poisonwood Bible*. It is about Nathan Price, a fundamentalist preacher who goes to Africa to save the lost. His ministry is a failure, mostly because he wants to save them, but he does not love them. In the process, he destroys his family, arguably for the same reason.

After a life of crisis, Orleanna, Nathan's wife, leaves Africa taking the children she can. They have four children, one of whom dies from a snake bite in Africa.

Daughter Adah returned to the states and was scarred by some terrible things that happened. But mostly, Adah was scarred by the fact that she was a twin. Leah, her twin, was beautiful and smart. Adah, her body twisted, walked with a limp — something that resulted from having to share life with a sister who demanded too much of the womb. She always feared that, as the lesser one, she would be left behind.

And one night she was. In the middle of the night, ants marched into the village. They covered the

ground and consumed everything in their path. Everyone in the village raced to the river to escape. But how does a little girl with a limp escape? It's a long story, so I will jump ahead. Thirty years later, Adah calls her mother. She asks, "That night at the river, why did you choose me?"

Orleanna says, "When push comes to shove, Adah, a mother loves her children from the bottom up."<sup>1</sup>

We are that way. We love our children, but the one who is sick gets our attention at the time. The one struggling with algebra gets our attention at the time. The one going through a divorce or who has lost her job, that's the one who gets our attention. We love our children from the bottom up.

I think God does too. That's why Jesus calls our attention to the least of these.

There is something essentially Christian about paying attention to those on the bottom. But why? What happens to us? What happens to the world when we see the least of these?

One answer comes from what is called "liberation theology." Liberation theology has grown up from broken places in the world where people's suffering has interacted with the gospel and raised important questions.

A central teaching of liberation theology is that God has a preferential option for those on the bottom. Those for whom the world has passed by, those for whom suffering is inescapable, those who are hungry, thirsty, naked and in prison, God pays attention to them first. God loves God's children from the bottom up. I think that is true. But I also think it is complicated.

Admittedly, it sounds like they are saying God loves the poor or the oppressed more than God loves others. There are more than a few places in scripture where it reads just that way. But I think it is complicated.

It doesn't make sense to speak of God loving some more than others. People of faith have often made such claims, and it has always resulted in the oppression of those deemed less lovable by God.

I remember about three years ago, the news reported an incident at a Carrabba's Restaurant. When the server picked up the check, no tip was left. On the check, the couple wrote the following: "Thank you for your service, it was excellent. That being said, we cannot in good conscience tip you, for your homosexual lifestyle is an affront to GOD. [You people] do not share in the wealth of GOD, and you will not share in ours. We hope you will see the tip your [gay slur] choices made you lose out on, and plan accordingly. It is never too late for GOD'S love, but none shall be spared for [you people]."

This is not holy. This is not Christian. This is just ugly. When

we think that God loves us more than others, we need to learn more about God.

But still, Jesus says, pay attention to those on the bottom. Why? What is supposed to happen when we really see the least of these?

I think it is because Jesus sees us as all the same family. He says so in the text: "Just as you did it unto the least of these who are members of *my family* ..." We create distinctions and division, separations and segregations, but Jesus does not see those dividing lines. To him, we are all his family. And when we pay attention to those on the bottom, we discover that it's not just their life that is broken, but we learn that all of us are broken. We are connected. Paul says we are one body. When part of the body hurts, the whole body is affected.

When our kids were young, I used to love to read books to them: *Goodnight Moon*; *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*; *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*. And I would read them some old books by Dr. Seuss. Remember *The Cat in the Hat*? *The Star Bellied Sneeches*? One of my favorites was *Yertle the Turtle*. Can I read you a bit? Do you mind?

*On a faraway Island of Solamasond,*

*Yertle the Turtle was king of the pond.*

*A nice little pond. It was clean. It was neat.*

*The water was warm. There was plenty to eat.*

*... until Yertle, the king of them all,*

*Decided the kingdom he ruled was too small.*

*"I'm ruler," said Yertle, "of all that I see.*

*But I don't see enough. That's the trouble with me."*

*... So Yertle, the Turtle King, lifted his hand*

*And Yertle, the Turtle King, gave a command.*

*He ordered nine turtles to swim to his stone*

*And, using these turtles, he built a new throne.*

*He made each turtle stand on another one's back*

*And he piled them all up in a nine-turtle stack.*

*And then Yertle climbed up. He sat down on the pile.*

*What a wonderful view! He could see 'most a mile!*

Well, as the story goes, Yertle grows more and more covetous of an expanding view. He demands more turtles to join in his throne, lifting him higher and higher, until:

*He saw, at the bottom, a turtle named Mack.*

*Just a part of this throne. And this plain little turtle*

*Looked up and he said, "Beg your pardon, King Yertle.*

*I've pains in my back and my shoulders and knees.*

*How long must we stand here, Your Majesty, please?"*

*"Silence!" the King of the Turtles barked back.*

*"I'm king, and you're only a turtle named Mack."*

Of course, being Dr. Seuss, it all works out well enough in the end, as the throne begins to shake and rumble and roll, and King Yertle falls thud down in the mud.

*And today the great Yertle,  
that Marvelous he,*

*Is King of the mud. That is  
all he can see.*

*And the turtles, of course ...  
all the turtles are free*

*As turtles and, maybe, all  
creatures should be.<sup>2</sup>*

If I understand the text, the problem with Yertle is that he failed to see that his “turtleness” is connected to a turtle named Mack. It is not good for the turtle to be alone. Am I making sense?

Our choir is helping us pay attention to the least of these today. Today, September 25, there are almost 200 choirs across the country that are paying attention to the victims of gun violence. Ryan Main learned of this and asked me if we could join them today. Could we sing of hope for folks whose hearts are broken? I think Jesus would be pleased.

I have been praying all week for my friends Joe Clifford and Lori Rable and Steve Lindsley and Pen Peery, who is Meg McLaughlin’s brother, for they are all friends of mine, and they are all pastors in Charlotte, North Carolina. They are in the middle of trying to bring healing to a city which, like most cities, hasn’t seen itself for a long time.

Keith Lamont Scott was shot. Protestors are demanding the video be released. The North Carolina legislature passed a law that goes into effect on Saturday that blocks the public from seeing dash camera and body camera footage.

The police say that Keith Lamont Scott had a gun. Others say he had a book. We don’t

know. Maybe he had a gun. We live in a time when many people think everyone should have a gun. The Missouri legislature ten days ago overturned Governor Nixon’s veto on a gun law that would have required folks to get a background check to see if they had a criminal history or were on some watch list.<sup>3</sup> Some think everyone should have a gun. I imagine that would make it hard to be a police officer.

We need a way forward. *Time Magazine* notes that gun violence in this country has decreased by almost 50 percent in the last 25 years.<sup>4</sup> That’s a good thing. But it doesn’t mean that things are good.

In this country, there were 16 people killed by guns yesterday. If we pay attention to shootings where four or more people are shot, then two Sundays ago in Westport there was a mass shooting — not far from Ryan Main’s apartment. Six were shot. It was one of six such shootings on that day alone.<sup>5</sup> Reports indicate that over 10,000 people have been killed by gun violence so far this year — almost nine months into the year.<sup>6</sup>

We need a way forward, and I think we would be wiser if we paid attention to those whose hearts have been broken by gun violence. Our scriptures call us to pay attention to the least of these. We should let them be our teachers. I think it is faithful to pay attention to those on the bottom because ultimately it is not just their brokenness we see, but ours.

Yertle the King Turtle can forget that his life is connected

to a turtle named Mack, but our King reminds us of the truth. We can’t be human alone. Our humanity is caught up in the humanness of others.

A month ago we saw a little boy from Syria. His name is Omran Daqneesh. He’s five years old. We saw him sitting dazed, bloodied and covered in dust after being pulled from the rubble of his home in Aleppo, Syria.

There was a little boy named Alex from New York who saw him too. He wrote a letter to President Obama. He wrote: “Remember the boy who was picked up by the ambulance in Syria? Can you please go get him and bring him to my home? Park in the driveway or on the street, and we will be waiting for you guys with flags, flowers and balloons. We will give him a family, and he will be our brother.

“In my school, I have a friend from Syria, Omar, and I will introduce him to Omar. We can all play together. We can invite him to birthday parties, and he will teach us another language. We can teach him English too, just like my friend Aoto from Japan.

“Since he won’t bring toys and doesn’t have toys, Catherine will share her big blue stripy white bunny. And I will share my bike, and I will teach him how to ride it. I will teach him additions and subtractions in math.”

I don’t know how Alex’s prayer will be received by the politicians who will make the decisions about how we respond to the thousands of little 6-year-old Syrian children, but I do know that Jesus is pleased.

The list of those who are on the bottom of life is long and desperate, and I am not wise enough to know what to do about all of them. But I am trusting Jesus that the first step is to see them — to really see them. Perhaps when we see them, what to do will become more clear.

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<sup>1</sup>Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998), p. 444

<sup>2</sup>Dr. Seuss, *Yertle the Turtle and Other Stories* (1950)

<sup>3</sup>“Gun Bill, Voter ID Overcome Vetos,” *Kansas City Star*, September 15, 2016, A-1

<sup>4</sup>“The New Politics of Gun Control,” *Time Magazine*, September 12/19, 2016, p. 48

<sup>5</sup>Gunviolencearchive.org

<sup>6</sup>Again, Gunviolencearchive.org

**This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.**

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.