

# Doing Unto Jesus

“Let it loose!”

Matthew 25:31-46

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## In Jail

I have been to jail. When I was living in Traverse City area pastors were invited to take turns leading mid-week chapel services at the county facility and, like several clergy, I would take my turn. One of my first times there I was led through the security points and down the hallways as the bars locked behind me. I got situated in the room and the first group of inmates took their seats. I wasn't altogether certain about the program, so after I was introduced by the chaplain and I greeted the group I asked, "How long do I have?" One of the inmates sitting answered me, he said, "30 days!"

Just before moving to Grand Rapids I visited for my last time and invited a church member who was a world-class jazz saxophonist to come with me. So, I did the preaching and song leading. He accompanied the singing and played some improvisations on hymns that had us all – well – captivated. I could soon see it in their faces: what I could not get across through the spoken word, Bill communicated in the silky alto voice of his sax. The Spirit moved.

At the end of each service we greeted the inmates meeting each at the door, just as we do here each Sunday. I think that's when it happened for Bill. It was when hand clasped hand in the usual shake that the people became ...personal. To be sure, the motivation for the inmates' attendance varied. Some of them were Christian; some had just given their lives to Christ while sitting in a cell. Others were there just to break the boredom.

But, as I said, after Bill had played the way he played, even the most disinterested couldn't help but appreciate his caliber and understand what a gift they had received.

And it was beginning to occur to Bill that he had done something significant for people in trouble like he had never done before.

He'd taken his gift and turned it into ministry. Now it meant something more than it had before.

Face-to-face, there was a connection. One of them looked at Bill, who had played with greats like Dizzy Gillespie and Ray Charles, and said, “I have connections with Eastport Bar. Anytime you want, I can get you a gig.” There was something more there. I think he and I agreed: in those moments we sensed the presence of Jesus.

Times like that involve more than just the “feel good” of helping someone. In times like that there is something in play that exceeds a simple rise above the usual level of social responsibility. It’s something more than gaining the merit of God by going one step better than usual. It’s something more on a cosmic level: you know that when you engage in a simple act of kindness something of the universe – no, something of God breaks through the humdrum of life. It triggers a moment of true righteousness. I am convinced Jesus would say, “That’s it. It’s what I have been trying to tell you. This is the most important thing. When you do this...you find me.”

### **Finding Jesus**

That’s really the point in Jesus’ parable about the sheep and the goats. Jesus said that when everything is said and done, the peoples will be gathered by the Risen Christ like a farmer brings the sheep and goats out of the field to be bedded for the night. In daytime hours they graze together, but at night they are separated because sheep love the fresh air and goats prefer huddling in warm shelter. So the peoples are separated: one group on the right and the other on the left.

Interesting, how he welcomes the sheep and casts out the goats on the basis of what they have done or not done to the ones he calls, “*the least of these.*” There’s no mention of having to account for scandalous sins the media takes pleasure reporting and we seem to think weigh so heavily. Not that we should just disregard those regulations, but Jesus sees something else as having much greater weight. He says, “I was hungry, I was thirsty, I was a stranger, I was naked, I was sick, I was in prison...and you fed me, you gave me something to drink, you welcomed me, you gave me clothing, you took care of me, you visited me...or you didn’t.”

The first big surprise is how ignorant the righteous are about the good works they have pulled off for the King. The same thing could be said about the unrighteous. Both are unaware of the good works he or she could claim or not claim for credit. For the righteous, it is as if what is done is accomplished not at all as an effort to achieve

something for one's self. It is simply an automatic act that expresses who one is and has, as its sole aim, the benefit of another.

The second surprise is how much Jesus identifies with those in need, any need, especially the insignificant people neither group can remember. An act to one who is not appealing or sympathetic or even appreciative, is still an act done to Jesus.

Interesting, that Jesus uses sheep and goats to contrast the way people can be.

*Goathood* is not, much to my relief, a matter of being an "old goat." Old goats may have other issues to cope with, but they are not the subject of Jesus' disappointment here. Nor is a goat a thing that everyone has but are able to lose, as in "somebody's got your goat." The "goats" Jesus means are rather like goats of the barnyard who seek shelter as their first priority. They are those who worry first "about what they shall eat or drink or wear" and do not "seek first God's Kingdom and his righteousness."

Since faith isn't just a set of beliefs to which you subscribe but is your relationship with God, revealed by your order of priorities and the way you live your way of life, faith is something defines who you are and what you do. Jesus is saying that if you're going to live your life caring little about anyone beyond the people you want to be closest to, you are a goat. You can be quite religious, quite moral, even quite polite...but without having a spontaneous compassion that suggests Christ-likeness, you're a goat. You are still just looking out for yourself, not God. Your action tells the story. And if you're inclined to ask, "What do I have to do to put me in good standing? What's the minimum requirement I have to meet to avoid being considered a goat?" you're being a goat. No matter how you put it, you're still just looking for your own shelter.

Then, there's the matter of *sheephood*. In a Sausalito, California restaurant in 1982 Anne Herbert scrawled on a place mat the words: *PRACTICE RANDOM ACTS OF KINDNESS AND SENSELESS ACTS OF BEAUTY.*<sup>1</sup> The notion caught on. You might have seen it on a bumper sticker.

Doing random acts of kindness, without keeping score ...is the way to be a sheep.

These are the sheep: those who help others, but not because they have to. It's just who they are; it's the way they live. They aren't really concerned about not being goats

because they are too busy just being sheep. If you reach out to others simply because you know what God's love tastes like and have an impulse to share it, you're a sheep.

Jesus will be found where you'll find the most broken and vulnerable people. These are his friends. Read the gospels and you'll see. Sheep want to hang out with Jesus: so they'll go be with his friends. And there you'll find his compassion is contagious.

Jesus loved and cared for you and me because that's how he was made...and he wants you and me to be made of the same thing: **sheep stuff**.

### **Let It Loose!**

The film, *Pay it Forward* begins in the classroom when seventh grade Trevor gets an unexpected assignment: *Think of an idea to change the world – and put it into action*. He engages the assignment by inviting a homeless man into his home, applying the principle that if one person benefits from another's act of good will, he or she must "pay it forward" to three more people who in turn must do another good deed for three more people. Trevor learns that to improve the world, people must learn to welcome change and take risks.<sup>2</sup>

When it's all said and done, one act of kindness will change the world. There's no telling how much it can change.

By the grace of God, you have received Jesus: his living and his dying and his undying presence today. This is the greatest of all God's acts of good will.

May you pay that forward: when you do, maybe you'll see it in the face of the one who receives it, like Bill; and then again, maybe you won't.

Either way, the call of Jesus is to be who you are:

which, now is what his goodness has made you.

Be a sheep. Take the faith he's given you...and **let it loose!**

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.auscharity.org/kind.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Cinefiles Film Review, "Pay It Forward", 2000. [http://www.cinephiles.net/Pay\\_It\\_Forward/Film-Synopsis.html](http://www.cinephiles.net/Pay_It_Forward/Film-Synopsis.html)