“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.”

This teaching is one of the foundations of Christianity. It speaks to part of our incarnational theology, because Jesus lives in each of us. It is also the foundation of our outreach ministry. We are called to care for each other and for all of humanity. This seems to be one of the things that all Christian denominations – whether conservative or liberal – can agree about. We are to take care of those in need.

Another aspect of today’s Gospel is the story of God sorting out the flock at the end of the age. Jesus uses the analogy of the shepherd, once again, only this time He is sorting the sheep from the goats. The sheep are the righteous, who will enjoy eternal bliss, and the goats are the unrighteous, doomed to eternal damnation.

I have often wondered why the goats get cast in the role of the unrighteous. Let me tell you a little bit about my own experience with sheep and goats.

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I once spent a summer on a cattle ranch in southern Idaho, near Twin Falls. My friend’s father had moved the family from Las Vegas. While my friend’s family owned 200 head of heifers, most of the ranchers in the area raised large flocks of sheep.

I found it fascinating to watch the sheep herders and their dogs moving an entire flock down the road from one pasture to another. The sheep, for the most part, stayed together while bleating loudly, following their master. Occasionally, one would stray, and a dog would push it back into the flock.

My friends had four sheep on their ranch. Occasionally, my friend and I would be asked to move the sheep and I learned two things: one, we were lousy sheepdogs, and two, sheep were not such warm, fuzzy animals, especially just four of them. When not part of a larger flock, they were stubborn and tended to run the opposite direction from where we wanted them to go. Additionally, they were dirty, oily, and smelly. Those same sheep, when integrated into a neighbor’s flock, were content to follow, but apart, they were not pleasing to be around.

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People can be like that. We tend to find those who we consider part of our own community pleasing. Those who are like us are easy to be with. When we feel part of the community, we are more pleasant and happy. It is easy to give to people who we find more like ourselves. It is more relaxing to be around them. It comes naturally to think of them as part of the flock. To us, they are the sheep.

On the other hand, we know we are supposed to take care of everybody. So, we collect food and clothes for programs that care for the needy and marginalized. We take this stuff to places that service those folks. It is a little bit harder to go into places where we are uncomfortable and don’t feel as if we belong, and to be around those who are not part of our flock. At least those who we perceive as being not in our flock!

Going back to the sheep and goat analogy, the sheep are those who are part of the flock and follow the rules of the flock. The goats are not part of a flock and don’t have a flocking mentality. They don’t behave in the prescribed way and they aren’t easily herded. Goats are fairly independent, but they can be soft and cuddly and fun to be around. Personally, I kind of like the goats better.

Sometimes it’s hard to tell the sheep from the goats. But in this Gospel, what separates the sheep from the goats is not their outward appearance or their independent, fun loving personalities. What separates the sheep from the goats is their behavior and their willingness to follow the teachings of Christ.

So what makes a person a sheep or a goat from Jesus’ point of view? Would we sort people out in the same way?

When I worked in downtown Indianapolis, I used to see men and women begging on street corners. They would usually be sitting against a light pole with a sign asking for help. They would be shaking a cup of coins. Most of the time, they were unwashed and rough-looking by most standards. Some people would drop a few coins in their cups and occasionally someone would bring them a cup of coffee or sandwich.

I seldom saw anyone actually look at them or carry on any kind of conversation with them. It was clear they were giving, as the Gospel instructs, but did they see these street people as part of the same flock?
In a prior parish, I saw this question played out in a profound way. At Christmas time, it was a custom of the parish to have an “Angel Tree Program.” People would call the church office asking for help at Christmas time. The parish would identify a few families and they would provide requested gifts for each family member by having parishioners purchase gift requests placed on ornaments on the tree. On the last Sunday of Advent, the gifts would be delivered.

There was one particular family, whom I will call the Green family (not their real name). They were recipients of the program for three years running. The Greens began to be more comfortable about calling the church seeking help for reasons other than Christmas and developed a relationship with the rector.

The rector always invited them to church and finally after three years they decided to come to a Sunday morning Eucharist. When they entered the nave, heads turned. People looked visibly uncomfortable. The Green family looked nothing like the flock.

This was a large family, with multiple generations, grandparents, grown children, and about five grandchildren. They wore ill-fitting, worn out clothes, not what one usually wears to church. Nothing matched. Their clothing was stained and torn. The children ran around the nave. One of them tried to climb on the Baptismal font. The children and the adults talked aloud. They didn’t follow the service.

At coffee hour, the children rushed to the table, touching things, and the adults filled their plates with as much as they could. The children continued to run around and shout. When they left, they asked to take home the leftovers. It was pretty clear that most of the parish looked upon the Green family as goats.

Now I must tell you, the Green family still attends church there. Their behavior has changed, and they have become more like the flock, although they are still victims of generational poverty. Most of the parish has accepted them as part of the parish but they are really not treated as full members of the flock.

Some people actually left the parish because “this was not what they came to church to see on Sunday.” There were members who vocally wanted to force them out of the parish and to stop giving to them because they were considered lazy people who just wanted to live off of handouts. These folks did not represent the majority of the parish, but they were more than just a few. The Greens were reminders of some of the ugly things in life.

How do you think Jesus saw all this? Who were the sheep and who were the goats? While the Greens stayed away, some people were happy to give to them and felt good about it. After all, they were giving to who they saw as the least of God’s children and thus they were giving to Jesus. What so many forgot was that it is not enough just to give, it is important to see that these least of Jesus’ family are part of the same family as those who give. They are members of the flock.

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It is easy to give. Giving makes us feel good and righteous. The Gospel is not just about giving. Jesus calls on us to do more than just give to those less fortunate. He calls on us to welcome those who we might consider the least.

Most of the time it is also easy to be welcoming. We are good at it. Nativity is one of the most welcoming parishes I have ever been in. Sometimes, though it is hard to be welcoming. Those are the times when our welcoming is most important.

We are challenged to be welcoming to those who don’t seem to be part of the flock. Not just welcoming to the people who come from abject poverty, but to those who have different views and those who come from different backgrounds. These are the people who we must remember are part of the same flock.

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Jesus tells us that flock includes prisoners, the sick, strangers, and the poorest of the poor. We don’t get to decide who to welcome. We may be very surprised who God sees as the sheep and who might be the goats.

“The righteous will say, “Lord, when was it we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing?’ And 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.’”

We are all a part of the flock, sheep and goats alike.

We are all members of the King’s family.

And we are called to love – and welcome – one another.

Thanks be to God!