

## Feed Them with Justice

[Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24](#)

[Matthew 25:31-46](#)

We are all familiar with this gospel story of the end time when the sheep and the goats will be separated, but less familiar I think with the Old Testament reading. You will remember that Ezekiel was a contemporary of Jeremiah's who prophesied the fall of Jerusalem, and then was exiled into Babylon when it happened. Ezekiel was unusual in that he was given to visions, in addition to hearing the word of the Lord he saw the word of the Lord. It was Ezekiel, for example, who saw the valley of the dry bones and the breath of God bringing the bones back to life.

In this morning's reading from Ezekiel 34 we heard that God will gather his sheep from wherever they have been scattered and bring them back into safety. For us it has an echo of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, but of course for those of Jesus' time his description of himself as the Good Shepherd will have echoed this passage. So it seems familiar and comfortable until the shepherd starts judging between sheep and sheep. And it's the fat sheep that he doesn't want.

Most of us think a healthy fat sheep would be worth more than a skinny injured sheep. But not our God.

God says, "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." Why? "Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide," he says - Because the fat sheep got fat at the expense of the others, God says "I will feed them with justice."

I will feed them with justice

That is perhaps the best description I have found of the last judgement that we mention in the creed when we say of Christ, "He will come again to judge the living and the dead." This is a difficult idea for many of us, myself included. It doesn't seem to jive with the loving God that we worship and serve and love.

Yet we live in an unjust world. We live in a world where the richer get richer and the poor get poorer. Over the past 50 years, the highest-earning 20% of U.S. households have steadily brought in a larger share of the country's total income. In 2018, households in the top fifth of earners (with incomes of \$130,001 or more that year) brought in 52% of all U.S. income, more than the lower four-fifths combined. And overall, black household income was only 61% of white.<sup>1</sup> And of course when you look at the global picture inequality is much worse. In the nine years between 2009 and 2018, the number of billionaires it took to equal the wealth of the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/02/07/6-facts-about-economic-inequality-in-the-u-s/>

world's poorest 50 percent fell from 380 to 26.<sup>2</sup> Just 26 people now have as much wealth as 3.8 billion people.

And of course inequality is measured in so much more than assets or income – it includes access to quality education, decent housing, medical resources and legal representation.

I don't think this is ok with God and it certainly isn't ok with those who are being oppressed. So the day of judgement is not about whether you've been good or bad; its about setting the world right. It's about justice for those who have never experienced justice. I don't know how you can bring justice for a black man who didn't get a decent education, never had much in the way of work prospects and spent the best part of his life behind bars for drug offences. But fortunately, I'm not God.

At the end of time we believe that Christ will come again and will, as Ezekiel put it, feed us with justice.

This is one reason that we try not to judge, not to act out of anger or vengeance; because that's God's job – it's God's work to put everything right at the end of time. And that is our hope. All the things that we cannot fix, all the issues that we cannot resolve; all the feelings that we cannot transform – that's the work of Christ the Sovereign. And at the end of time the day will come when all will be resolved.

But the great prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures warn again and again against complacency. The Jewish people, believing that they were specially called by God, thought that keeping the religious rules and showing up for services was enough. They fondly imagined that at the end of the time, the "Day of the Lord" would be a time when all their enemies would be vanquished and they would be vindicated and all would be well. But prophets like Amos made it very clear that just being Jewish and being religious wasn't enough.

And that's a theme that was picked up by the apostle Paul. He was very clear that reconciliation with God is not something that is the result of ethnic heritage or even the result of sticking to the religious laws. Reconciliation with God comes as the result of God's free gift. God has called you to be part of the community of the New Covenant, the people who have accepted the gift of re-union with the living God, the people who have died to sin and been reborn into Christ. I know that you are called because you are listening to me now. It doesn't depend on your feeling of rightness or on your believing three impossible things, it just depends on God.

As people of the New Covenant we get to live justice. Christ feeds us and we feed the world with justice. It is not an easy calling, especially in a country which is a very fat sheep. We get to create a community of resistance, a community which honors those on the margins, bringing them into the center. And there are many on the margins. I am grateful that St Benedict's has always welcomed gay and lesbian people and their families, bringing us from the margin to the center. But we have not managed so well with people of low income, less education, less

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<sup>2</sup> <https://inequality.org/facts/global-inequality/#:~:text=Global%20Wealth%20Inequality,-Unexpected%20Error&text=According%20to%20the%20Credit%20Suisse,percent%20of%20the%20world's%20wealth.&text=Individuals%20owning%20over%20%24100%2C000%20in,82.8%20percent%20of%20global%20wealth.>

resources or with people of different racial groups. St Benedict's is even whiter than the very white community in which we live.

And reaching out to those on the margins includes those outside our circle. It includes those who are not American, those who live in other countries, and it includes Creation. Creation has been marginalized. We have built houses and factories where we pleased; we have plundered the earth for our own gain with little thought for the natural world. I know it seems crazy sometimes, but I am grateful that here in Los Osos we privilege a banded snail and a red-legged frog – that our development is constrained by the need to provide them with habitat.

Each one of us has a mixed profile of being at the center and being marginalized. I am marginalized as a woman and as a lesbian, and sometimes as an immigrant because I will never fully understand cultural references. But I am highly privileged by my education, by financial stability, by having work I love and by my status in the community.

Life changes can move people suddenly from the center to a margin and that is hard to accept. Our brother Steve Hirahara was a man who had great compassion for those who were on the margins. He knew personally and through his friends how hard it can be. I think perhaps he felt himself moving farther into the margins and powerless to stop the process. He couldn't bear to experience that and so he took himself home.

Which is a sad and powerful reminder to us that life in the margins is often painful and tragic. But today's gospel reminds us that it is also where we are most likely to encounter Christ.

Because we are the people of the new covenant, because we are people who have been reunited with God in Christ, we get to be the Body of Christ. Our place is with those on the margins. Our place is serving those who are ignored. Our job is to join in the great work of Christ and feed God's people with justice. Which means identifying the skinny sheep and feeding them. It also means identifying the fat sheep who are oppressing them and working with all the political means at our disposal to prevent them continuing to "push with flank and shoulder, and butt at all the weak animals with their horns."

I invite you this Thanksgiving week to identify those places where you can influence public policy and to think of those you know who are marginalized - consider how you can help them into the center, how you can feed them, not with turkey, but with justice.

Because that is God's work and we, the people of God, should be about our Creator's business.