

Gaines Congregational United Church of Christ

November 26, 2023

Old Testament Reading; Ezekiel 34: 11-16, 20-24

Responsive Reading; Psalm 95: 1-7

Epistle Reading; Ephesians 1: 15-23

Gospel Reading; Mathew 25: 31-46

Sermon Title; **Which End of the Table?**

By Rev. Jim Gardner

Summary; Goat or sheep-your choice at God's Thanksgiving table.

This past Thursday we celebrated Thanksgiving.

We sat down, bowed our heads and tried to thank God for everything He has given us. This is quite a job because God has given us everything that we have. He gave us the world, the universe, the food we eat, the homes we live in, our health, our loved ones, love itself and the list goes on into infinity.

God has given us everything we have to be thankful for but have we given God anything to be thankful for?

I have a prayer that I say whenever I am driving. It goes like this. "God please don't let me be part of an accident that hurts or kills anyone. Help me not to look like or be a fool, or hit anything, or trade paint or mess up the vehicle that I am driving. I promise that I will not brag about my driving, and I will try to only brag about you. I will be and I hope I am being the person you want me to be, and I hope a lot of others are so you can have a nice day. I love you Jesus, thank you for your light. Amen" A few years ago I was talking to Rev. John Riley Goddard about how I believed that God was pleased when His people attempted to do His will. John asked me, "Do you really think you can have an effect on God?"

Now I know that God is God and that He does not need us. God can and will accomplish His will with or without our help. I am familiar with what Mordecai said to his niece Queen Esther when he was asking for her to intercede for her people at the risk of her own life. Mordecai said to Esther, "Do not think in your heart that you will escape in the King's palace any more than all the other Jews, for if you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. Yet, who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a

time as this?" If you keep your mouth shut God will send help from somewhere else. God does not need us but God can use us.

My answer to John was that I really believe that we can have an effect on God. I told John, as I have told you, that I believe that the most powerful verse in the Bible is, "Jesus wept."

Jesus was on His way to raise Lazarus from the dead. Jesus knew that the friends that were grieving for Laz would soon see the glory of God and have their beloved friend returned to them. Jesus knew that but Jesus saw the pain that they were feeling, and Jesus hurt for them enough to weep. By the way, I am offended by translations that water this down by saying, "Jesus began to weep." Jesus did not begin to weep and then caught himself before He showed weakness, no, Jesus wept! God was affected by a human circumstance. Hence, we can have an effect on God. "God is more pleased by the one sinner who is saved than the ninety nine righteous that did not need saving."

By the way John's response was kind of, "Hum?" It was not at all disrespectful but rather a kind of, "Wow, what a concept."

In the Old Testament when the Jews worshiped the golden calf and God was so angry that He was planning on destroying His people and starting over with Moses, Moses intervened and persuaded God not to destroy the people.

Now I do not completely buy into Moses changing God's mind but I do believe that God's reaction was, "Yes! That is what I'm talking about. My servant Moses loves his people enough to risk his life by taking Me on. Now that is loving others as I loved them. Yes!"

In our Gospel today about the sheep and the goats, I believe that God is showing that he is pleased when the people do good for each other and disappointed when they do not live up to showing the love that He sent His son to demonstrate for us. If you walk by someone on the street or in the hallway and they look depressed, and you stop and go back to them and ask them if they are OK, I believe that you have an effect on God. I believe that God says to Himself, and maybe the angels, "OK, Linda, or Carol, or Kathy or whoever, that is what I wanted to see. Thank you, thank you, thank you."

On the other hand, if one of us screws up, I believe that God sighs with a sigh greater than words, and says, "Jim, Jim, Jim, you are better than that. I love you but I expect more from you."

God loves us always and will not throw us away but we have the choice to be His sheep or His Goats. We can cause God to be thankful or we can cause God to sigh with a sigh deeper than words. Our choice,

In this time of thanksgiving look at our scripture readings for today. The ninety-fifth Psalm sings praises of God and encourages us to give thanks. In the Epistle, Paul gives thanks for the Ephesians and their faith and earnest seeking God's spirit and wisdom. Ezekiel assures the people that God will bring them home and will provide them with the justice that they have been missing in exile. God will and does provide His people with a great deal to be thankful for. Then, the Gospel shows how God is grateful/thankful for those of us who do good unto the least of these.

So which end of God's Thanksgiving table will you sit on? I believe it will be a hectic game of musical chairs. One minute you are a goat and the next minute you will be a sheep and then back again. We will keep changing back and forth but God will always remain the same loving, compassionate savior who praises our successes and sighs at our failures but is always with us even to the end of the age. Let us all try to give Him something to be thankful for.

Hallelujah and Amen.