

Through snow and wind, 22 of us from Gethsemane made it down to Cragun's resort in Brainerd on Friday and back just yesterday for the Middle School Gathering. Each year there is a different theme that attempts to supplement what congregations are already doing in their ministry for confirmation. This weekend we talked about the Ten Commandments as being "loving rules". Because sin breaks apart our relationships – with God and with one another – we need some rules, some loving rules for how to be in relationship. It was a good lesson, especially for us adult leaders to use at one in the morning when some youth weren't quite ready to wind down yet: "Loving rules help us be in relationship. Good night girls!"

When Jesus talks about the Son of Man coming in his glory and the judgment scene, the goats and sheep are not judged on how they kept or didn't keep rules or laws. They are judged by how they lived in relationship to others. They are judged by compassion. The sheep will have lived with compassion, not even realizing that they are helping others sometimes – it just comes so naturally as part of their life in Christ. They have no idea that with each act of compassion, they are serving and loving the Lord. They even ask for clarification, "when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?"

Frederick Buechner once defined compassion this way, "Compassion is sometimes the fatal capacity for feeling what it is like to live inside somebody else's skin. It is the knowledge that there can never really be any peace and joy for me until there is peace and joy finally for you too."¹

The goats, on the other hand, are those without compassion. They live in relationships of cruelty, harshness, meanness, indifference and tyranny...all opposite of compassion. They have never had any intention of being there for others and sound almost surprised when Jesus calls them on their lack of compassion. Just like the sheep, the goats ask, "and when was it that you were sick or in prison and we didn't take care of you?" The goats would have been very happy to have compassion on Jesus, someone who was worth it. But to have compassion on the least of these, who cares about them?

Turns out Jesus does.

When we read this passage in context, we find that it is one of a few judgment stories. Right before the judgment stories, Jesus publically denounces the scribes and Pharisees, starting each phrase off with "woe to you, scribes and Pharisees!" His main argument against them is that they act like hypocrites – saying one thing and doing another. After these judgment stories, we hear of the scribes and Pharisees conspiring to kill Jesus. So, these judgment stories are sandwiched between Jesus' conflict with the high priests.

So when Jesus is talking about the sheep and the goats is it really about a future judgment or is his story a commentary about what is happening to "the least of these" in first century Palestine, maybe at the hands of these high priests? Yes.

¹ www.thinkexist.com

While on earth, Jesus took on the hypocrites and those that kept others down, and in the end, he takes on the hypocrites and those that kept others down. The kingdom of God is one of compassion. Everything that Jesus stands for is compassion. It is such compassion that made him take a long and lonely walk under a cross and die for a broken and hypocritical people – us – sinners, sheep, goats. Our compassion clearly matters to God, but God's compassion toward us, well, it's our only hope.

And, it's the only hope we need.

Jeremy Myers is a religion/youth ministry professor at Augsburg College in Minneapolis; he was the speaker for the Middle School gathering this year. He gave two presentations on the "Loving Rules" or the Ten Commandments and he broke them up into two sections. The first three commandments have to do with our relationship with God, and the last seven have to do with our relationships to each other. When he talked about the first three, he talked about how having no other gods, not taking the Lord's name in vain and honoring the Sabbath is our faith in God, our trust in God that mends the relationship broken by sin. Once we place our trust in God, God, in his infinite mercy, looks at us and says, "Yes, our relationship is good. Don't worry about it, we're fine and I've got your back. But I created you to be in relationship with one another as well. So go, and help your neighbor by living and loving these rules."

There is peace when we realize that we don't have to worry about our relationship with God, when we trust that God's compassion is for us and we allow that grace to settle deeply in our bones.

We can take that peace and we can share it with each other. Because, as our speaker pointed out, we are created to be in relationship with one another (10:45am: are we created to be in relationship with one another?) Not that we earn special brownie points or that we're going to pass some sort of test up in heaven, no! We feel good because it feels normal. It's what we were created to do! To be in compassionate relationship with each other.

That's the great thing about the sheep in our gospel reading today. They don't have a clue that what they did was so special, because they had been doing what came naturally. It's what they were created to do, and it's what the redeemed life in Christ enables us to do.

And so, today, we are encouraged to be sheep. We are challenged to look at the people we encounter in life with compassion, and to be grateful when others wrap us in compassion. Just as we have fun getting together at youth gatherings and doing silly things like running through Iron Man blow up obstacle courses or jousting, playing four square or video games, shooting hoops or swimming in a pool (or sitting by the pool, which the adults did) we find the same joy when we encourage one another and help each other out. Because as Jesus tells us and as the junior high kids learned this weekend, "loving rules!" Amen.