

The Sheep and the Goats

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a sermon to seminarians
Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, Evanston IL

I've been at Seabury for more than a year now, and I have almost three years ahead of me, but most of you don't know who I am. So let me remedy that. I want you to have a framework for what I want to say today about the sheep and the goats and Seabury-Western.

My name is Dr. Catherine Wallace, and I'm usually called a "cultural critic." My ministry is to people outside the church, to people struggling with the possibility that God might be real. My ministry is to people who are starving in an era of spiritual famine, starving because they have no idea, no idea at all, about what Christianity might offer them.

Through my writing, I try to open out the God-shaped hole in cultural discourse about the meaning, value, and purposes of our lives. In doing that, I also open out the God-shaped hole within ordinary human experience. I've discovered that it's ringed with fire. On book tour, giving lectures and interviews, I found it scathing, absolutely scathing, to come face to face with the hunger for God. So I'm at Seabury to recharge, to listen to God-talk here, and not incidentally to write another such book. And, as some of you know, to help you with your own writing.

Which brings me to today's Gospel.

I think this is a very dangerous text. I think it has been used and abused in ways that are wildly at odds with what Jesus taught. Fear of this text--or encounters with how it has been used against them--keeps many good people as far away from churches as they can get. Furthermore I think this famous passage creates a fair amount of grief even here at the seminary.

Today is the feast of Martin Luther, and the readings for today offer a Gospel that has provided an enduring metaphor for the Reformation doctrine of predestination: the sheep and the goats. The doctrine of predestination sets aside the significance of our

efforts to love one another, calling them nothing more than "works righteousness." After all, no spiritual practice, no resolute efforts to be kind, can turn a goat into a sheep. Some of us are predestined to be saved; some of us are not. Although Matthew later says what saves us is our effort to see in each other the face of Christ, sheep make no particular effort to be sheep. Goats are simply . . . goats. We are what God destines us to be, sheep or goat, because we exist in a radically determinist universe governed by a radically omnipotent God.

I think that predestination is as dangerous a heresy as any we have ever devised. It's yet another example of Greek philosophy messing with Jewish theology. But despite its fine pedigree or official orthodoxy, predestination is an error not only in theology but also in cosmology.

Physicists and cell biologists alike assure us that from the most minute molecular levels to the farthest reaches of an unimaginably huge universe, the created world combines spectacularly gorgeous order with radical indeterminacy. We don't have to be predestined puppets in order for God to be God. And so contemporary theology is quietly resuscitating "good works" under the label "spiritual practices."

That's a good thing, that's a very good thing, because this sheep and goats business is poisonous. It plays into the biological fact that we are extremely vulnerable social animals. Our survival depends upon our belonging to a group, and the survival of our group depends upon our shared vigilance against rivals and predators. Human evolutionary success depended in part upon our ability to figure out who belongs and who does not belong to our core community.

As a result, we are innately disposed to set up goat-checks. We are naturally inclined to inspect one another for evidence of goat, rather than seeing in one another the image of God.

That's why all this endless scrutiny called "the ordination process" takes such a terrible toll on community life here at Seabury. How many committees can scrutinize you before you start scrutinizing one another? How many goat-checks can you endure before you start inflicting them on one another? It seems to me, as an outside observer to all this, that Seabury itself does everything it can to mitigate "the process." Seabury-Western

seems to understand that it does not nurture leaders by treating seminarians like a bunch of sheep--sheep who also have to keep proving they are not goats!

There is grace in the Seabury vision. And I hope there is equal grace in your bishop or your own commission on ministry. But such gentle wisdom and human kindness will never stop our tendency to divide the people around us into sheep and goats.

Our lives and our perceptions are massively shaped by our own cultural contexts, and the American culture around us is obsessed with certification and with hoof-and-mouth inspections of every possible kind. Americans, we are told, are all "self-made men." That means we have to prove ourselves to one another, over and over and over again. We are *what we make of ourselves*, not what God makes of us--which is images of God. Each of you came to Seabury, each of you entered "the process" already beat up by many, many experiences of being made to prove that you're no goat. Each of you brought with you to Seabury an utterly American fear of becoming a self-made failure, even if you are not American-born, because that fear is in the air that we breathe and the water we drink.

Despite the psychological pressure exerted by all this inescapable scrutiny, we *can* refuse to scrutinize one another. We *can* trust that God has called each of us here. We can let that be enough. It is more than enough. So if you resent the scrutiny, if you are tired of being haunted by the all-American fear of failure, then take a very deep breath and simply *stop looking around for goats*. Welcome one another. Period. Hospitality is central to who we are as Christians.

God's love is all-encompassing and furthermore it is utterly inexplicable. God's inclusive love sets for us an impossibly high set of standards, which is why we keep falling into goat-check mode. It is a whole lot easier to distinguish a sheep from a goat than it is to see the face of Christ in somebody who drives you crazy, somebody who annoys you, somebody who threatens you. No wonder we try to devise goat-checks of our own. Setting up goat detectors is a lot easier than trying to live together as the body of Christ. God's inclusive love will always baffle and bewilder our fragile human souls.

And that's okay by me. There can be something very honest and even healthy about ordinary bewilderment. What save us here, I think, is that we remain free to we find one

another just as inexplicable as God is. The mystery at the core of God is a mystery echoed in the core of each of us individually. We can refuse to inspect one another for evidence of goat because we know we cannot see all the way into the sacred depths of anyone else.

It's hard for me to imagine a set of spiritual practices that could be called more authentically Anglican than such a gracious, kindly, mature acceptance of mystery.

Amen.