

The pressure is on, and the pressure is rising. Headlines tell us that Reading is the poorest city in the nation. We're #1, and we're not alone. The ugly reality of a global economy is that when Greece falters, or Italy threatens to default, or disaster strikes Japan, we feel the pain. We pay for it at the pump. We pay for it at the grocery store and the pharmacy. Some of us pay for it when our paycheck disappears.

The pressure is on, and when the pressure is on, the truth is revealed. Who are we? What do we believe? What do we value? Are we sheep or are we goats?

Jesus portrays such a pressure-packed scene in what we commonly call, “The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats.” It's judgment day, and it is worth noting that this is Jesus' last teaching before he enters Jerusalem and goes to the cross. This is it. The last lesson, there will be a test, in fact, tests upon tests, so listen up, because sheep receive eternal life. Goats get eternal punishment.

So who are the sheep and who are the goats? Who is being judged? I always thought it was individuals. Sheep. Sheep. Goat. Sheep. Goat. Goat. Goat. I thought judgment day was about what I did or didn't do. *Matthew 25:40 (NRSV) ‘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.’¹*

But this week, I saw three words in this passage that I'd never noticed before. I was in such a hurry to get to the sheep and the goats that I missed these words, *Matthew 25:32 (NRSV) All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.²*

Individuals aren't being judged in this passage. Nations are. Peoples are. Judgment is plural; it's not about “me and Jesus.” It's about us, and the least of these, and above all, it's about the one who is in their midst – the shepherd of the nations – Jesus Christ.

✦ God takes sides

An excellent editorial in November 12th's *Reading Eagle* entitled, “In Politics Whose Side is God On?” noted, “At a time when the powerful want us to believe that God is posing as their personal adviser, it would do us good to remember Abraham Lincoln's reply to a question posed during one of the country's darkest chapters: “Sir, my concern

¹ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

² *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

is not whether God is on our side; my greatest concern is to be on God's side, for God is always right.”³

God takes sides. God is not impartial. God knows. God cares. God loves. God loves so much that following this lesson “the one who will one day come to judge us [was] the same one who first came to be judged for us.”⁴ God loves us enough to be judged by us. God loves us enough to render judgment upon us.

God takes sides, and as comforting as it is to assure ourselves that God is on our side, the witness of Scripture implores us to consider if we are on God's side. Consider Ezekiel's condemnation of Israel's faithless leaders: *Ezekiel 34:4 (NRSV) You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them.*⁵

Sounds like Jesus, doesn't it? This judgment is not levied against these shepherds as individuals. It's about the society they created; the life-less land they led God's sheep to; life-less land where God's sheep are struggling, suffering, dying.

God takes sides. God holds us accountable for the society in which we live. Recent articles in *The Reading Eagle* describe the persistent myth that poor people come to Berks County because the word is out that if you come to Berks County, we'll take good care of you.

I wish that were true! I wish that we had amply staffed and amply funded programs that would meet people's basic needs and provide the foundation upon which they could rebuild their lives. A sort of “Berks Community Action Program,” we'll call it BCAP because government programs love acronyms! And we'd offer lots of housing, and when the cold winter blows, no worries! We'd have a heating assistance program to help pay the bill so no one freezes.

I could go on, but you know what I'm talking about; I'm referring to two programs that have suffered massive budget cuts at the local, state, and federal level. People will freeze. People will die, because these kinds of cuts can kill.

³ Originally Published: 11/12/2011

Ana Veciana-Suarez: In politics, whose side is God on?

<http://readingeagle.com/article.aspx?id=345372>

⁴ http://www.workingpreacher.org/dear_wp.aspx?article_id=528

⁵ *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

We as a society have made some choices. We won't cut the defense budget that keeps us safe, but we will cut the poor. We won't cut the entitlement programs that benefit us, but we will cut the poor. We certainly won't decrease the size of the legislative staffs in Harrisburg or Washington, but we will cut the poor.

*Matthew 25:45 (NRSV) 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'*⁶

God takes sides. We take sides. We make choices with every budget and every vote. If we think God will bless America with the choices we are making, then we need to re-read our Bibles. Judgment day is coming. God's expectations are clear. When that day comes, where will America stand – with the sheep or with the goats?

✦ The Shepherd of the Nations

The answer to that question is in our hands. We're the disciples. We're the ones getting these final instructions from Jesus. There's a final exam coming; here are the questions; get to work! Be a shepherd of the nations!

The pressure is on, and we have an opportunity to give glory to God. Familiar words take on a deeper meaning at times like this: “The great ends of the church are the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind; the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of divine worship; the preservation of truth; the promotion of social righteousness; and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.”

The pressure is on, and if the government won't do what needs to be done, then it is time for the Church to once again step up and step out in faith.

It is a daunting task; we're going to take on economic development, health-care, and poverty? It won't be the first time. The Great Ends of the Church were adopted by the Presbyterian Church in 1910 as we took up the shepherd's staff in God's name for our nation.

We're so accustomed to the outcome of those efforts that we think it's always been this way:

- ✦ A 40-hour work week. (The steel mills didn't like that!)
- ✦ Child labor laws and public education
- ✦ Women's suffrage (you did vote?)

⁶ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

- ✦ Worker’s compensation
- ✦ Minimum wage
- ✦ The New Deal
- ✦ Social Security

And a few decades later, seeds sown when we picked up the shepherd’s staff resulted in Civil Rights legislation and the landmark Medicare and Medicaid legislation upon which many of us, many of our neighbors, and heaven knows “the least of these” rely.

We shall overcome, brothers and sisters! We shall overcome someday! Until then, we have work to do! We are to shepherd our nation from the life-less land of fear and desperation to that promised land of milk and honey where there is enough for all! No one goes to bed hungry! No one lies awake and frets! No one dies because they didn’t fit our agenda!

We shall overcome, not by acquiring power to dominate or wealth to seduce. We will not play the world’s games the world’s way. That is a lose-lose proposition! We shall overcome by serving; a cup of cold water here, a hot meal there in Jesus’ name. We shall overcome by serving our society as well; volunteering our time and our talent, finding common cause with any and all who seek to make this a better world.

Can we do this? Consider this: The Grand Canyon wasn’t created by a lightning strike in a moment but by the steady flow of water, day after day, year after year, millennia after millennia, that wore it down and revealed its beauty.

We shall overcome, and until we do, I offer you this Franciscan blessing:

May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half truths, and superficial relationships, so that you may live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may work for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation and war, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and to turn their pain into joy.

May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in this world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done.

May God bless you as together we pursue the Great Ends of the Church and our mission to be a shepherd of the nations. Amen.