

## THE PARADOX OF CHOICE (or, when more is less)

Reflection by Rev. Hubert Den Draak, April 7 2019

Gospel reading Matthew 25:31-46 (the parable of the sheep and the goats)

COFFEE		LATTE	
<i>Direct Trade Coffee, Locally Roasted</i>			
12oz. DRIP	2		
16oz. DRIP	2.5		
20oz. DRIP	3		
RED EYE	3.75		
FRENCH PRESS (serves 2)	5.75		
SLOW BAR	Mkt Price		
ESPRESSO		TEA	
<i>All pulled double shot espresso</i>		<i>Certified Organic Loose-Leaf Tea, Locally Blended</i>	
ESPRESSO	2.5	HOT TEA	2.5
AMERICANO	2.5	<i>See assorted flavors</i>	
BREVE	4	Add steamed milk	0.5
CAPPUCCINO	3.25		
FLAT WHITE	3.5	LONDON FOG, 12 oz.	3.75
MACCHIATO	3	Grey-lime (Earl Grey Black Tea)	
		w/steamed milk + vanilla	
EXTRAS			
ORGANIC MILK	.75		
ALMOND MILK	1		
SOY MILK	1		
FLAVORED SYRUP	0.5		
EXTRA SHOT	1		
		BLACK ICED TEA	1.8   2.2
		GREEN ICED TEA	2.1   2.5

One of the things I like about Halifax is the coffee culture here. Seems like every other block has its own independent coffee shop serving amazing coffee, usually organic or FairTrade. Heck, we even have a coffee shop owner right here in our congregation – it doesn't get any better than that!

But the first time I ordered a coffee here, I was overwhelmed by the

choices: drip coffee, French press, espresso, cappuccino, frappuccino, Americano, latte? Large, medium or small? To go or for here? Caf or decaf? Dark roast, medium or light? With room for dairy, soy, or almond milk? With a shot of something? Single or double shots? With a sprinkling of cinnamon a twist of lemon? It felt like my brain was about to explode!

We like choices; choices are a form of freedom – or so we think. But studies show that the abundance of choices that we have in our lives right now actually makes us more miserable than feeling free. We're trapped by choices. Or rather, we're trapped *between* choices, paralyzed by the vast array of... well, most anything. I mean, how many variations of potato chips do you really need?! Choice overload.

It's what's called a paradox. Something that's a contradiction in itself, something that's supposed to do one thing, but does the opposite. In this case, more choices don't mean more freedom, but more anxiety. More... is actually *less*.

That's paradox that sets the scene for the choice in today's parable.

"When the Son of Man comes in all his glory..." Jesus says. Now for so many that sounds like "end times" sort of stuff, but not for Matthew. Matthew believes Christ *has* come in his glory, that God is revealed in Christ and still is being revealed to us now.

Matthew lived and wrote in a time of great changes and tensions in the fledgling Christian church. So, as a child of his time, what he does is he uses apocalyptic end time language and imagery to give Christ's teaching a sense of urgency – not for some future time, but for the choices we make in our lives now.

And so when Jesus is talking about these sheep and goats standing before him, he isn't talking about some galaxy far, far away, but about now. Right. Now. As in: Sunday April 7, 2019. So even though it's not about the future per se, it has a strong forward thrust, it's future-oriented – based in the present.

And that changes the whole choice thing for us, doesn't it? Our response to God's call has consequences for us *now*, not just for some future time after we die. So today, right now, Jesus asks us, "What's it going to be?" It's the moment of decision – but on what...?

And that's where I have a bit of a problem. We all know the choice Jesus gives here: clothing the naked, feeding the poor, healing the sick, visiting the imprisoned. That's not the problem I have, we should be about all of these things. My issue is that we, the church, Christians in general, have taken these actions and made them the *goal*, the purpose of the Christian life instead of the *sign*, the symptom of a Christian life. Another paradox!

What I mean is this: I don't think that the goat's sin is that they didn't feed, clothe, visit, etc. Their sin is that they only did those things when they choose to, when they realize it helps their situation.

They imply so themselves in their own response to Jesus' accusation that they never clothed, fed, or visited him: "Well, Jesus, if we'd have *known* it was you, we would have done these things..." They thought they had a choice, they just didn't have all the information to make the *right* choice.

They would have done those things had they known that it was Jesus and that clothing, feeding, visiting would get them points in life and pats on the back. And who doesn't like to be patted on the back? It affirms us, affirms the choices we made, right? We tend to do the things that are helpful for us, the things that are useful for me or my family or my friends.

I've been in meetings where hard-working people stormed out in a tizzy because they didn't get the recognition or praise they felt they deserved. Now I'm all for giving credit where credit is due, especially when working with volunteers who offer much of their time and energy and often money without expecting anything in return. We need to honour that.

But when that work becomes about me, about my ego that needs to be stroked or about my agenda that needs to be promoted, then this parable reminds us of what the Christian life is about, which is: to be transformed, to let go of your ego and your agenda, so we can transform others in Christ's agenda.

The big mistake of the goats is not that they didn't feed, clothe, visit, etc. The big mistake is that they thought they had a choice in the matter. I'm willing to bet that many of them probably never missed a Sunday in church and did all kinds of charitable works. But it was calculated, a choice they made because it made them look good, or it fit their agenda, or whatever. Whereas people transformed by the grace of God *have* no choice, they just do these things.

As long as we think we have the freedom to feed or not to feed, to clothe or not to clothe, to give or not to give, we are in the hell of choice that's even worse than trying to figure out which bag of potato chips to take home in that aisle filled with bags and bags of 'em.

We clothe the naked not worrying if they will sell the clothes to buy drugs; we do it because that is what a Christ follower does, our love is unconditional. We feed, not wondering if the person in front of us has a job or has enough food at home or how come s/he drives a big truck, but because that is what a Christ follower does: we feed because we are fed in so many ways.

This morning's parable reminds us that in a world that's full of too many choices, we only have one choice that really matters: to be transformed or not. Simple, yes? Well, not always. All too often I forget, and I choose not to be transformed. I'll give you an example:

Last Tuesday morning on my way to the office I stopped in at Java Blend here on North St. to get myself a coffee. This time I came prepared, I knew exactly what I wanted. It was going to be a very full day, so I decided to treat myself to a latte (large, medium roast, with dairy, definitely caffeinated; I even brought my own insulated travel mug).

Just outside the coffee shop was a scrawny looking guy, young, maybe in his mid-twenties. He politely asked me if I had a loonie or two to spare, and I politely said, "Sorry..."

Except, I *did* have two loonies on me that I easily could have given him. But I didn't. I didn't because I wanted to beat a small group to the door so didn't have to wait in line for their orders to get through. I didn't because I was pretty sure this young man had a drug habit (I'm not that naïve, I know the symptoms), and those two loonies would only have supported his addiction.

I didn't because... because well, it was inconvenient. It was a 3-second encounter and a snap decision. A wrong decision for all the wrong reasons. Yes, those loonies might well have gone to support his drug habit – so what? Not giving him anything wasn't going to change that. The least I could have done is buy him a coffee, ask his name, and see him for the person he is, someone just as much beloved as I am – if not more.

But I didn't. It was a missed opportunity for transformation for both of us; I did not help God's upside-down kingdom get any closer that morning. Instead, I relapsed into thinking that there was a choice, and I chose me. That day I was Hubert... the goat. Feed or don't feed. Clothe or don't clothe. Visit only if it fits your schedule. I guess we can live like that, and many do.

So thank God for Scripture stories like these, the separating of the sheep and the goats. They remind us of our real purpose in this life here and now, *and* they also remind us of what the future can be like. Not a future that offers an either/or

choice, a future of that's only interested in what's in it for me or my friends, my city, my country; that is what I consider hell. Christ in this story offers us a future that's a both/and situation, where you are blessed to be a blessing to others, including – no, *especially* panhandlers with a substance abuse problem.

As we move into the last part of Lent, let us affirm our true sheepish nature and give and live with abandon. Jesus calls us, entices us and shows us how to live in this world as people who are servant of all and yet at the same time truly free. Another paradox, yes, and also the greatest form of grace in this world.

Amen.

### **Matthew 25:31-46** (the parable of the sheep and the goats)

<sup>31</sup> “But when the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit upon his glorious throne. <sup>32</sup> All the nations will be gathered in his presence, and he will separate the people as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. <sup>33</sup> He will place the sheep at his right hand and the goats at his left.

<sup>34</sup> “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world. <sup>35</sup> For I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home. <sup>36</sup> I was naked, and you gave me clothing. I was sick, and you cared for me. I was in prison, and you visited me.’

<sup>37</sup> “Then these righteous ones will reply, ‘Lord, when did we ever see you hungry and feed you? Or thirsty and give you something to drink? <sup>38</sup> Or a stranger and show you hospitality? Or naked and give you clothing? <sup>39</sup> When did we ever see you sick or in prison and visit you?’

<sup>40</sup> “And the King will say, ‘I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!’

<sup>41</sup> “Then the King will turn to those on the left and say, ‘Away with you, you cursed ones, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his demons. <sup>42</sup> For I was hungry, and you didn’t feed me. I was thirsty, and you didn’t give me a drink. <sup>43</sup> I was a stranger, and you didn’t invite me into your home. I was naked, and you didn’t give me clothing. I was sick and in prison, and you didn’t visit me.’

<sup>44</sup> “Then they will reply, ‘Lord, when did we ever see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and not help you?’

<sup>45</sup> “And he will answer, ‘I tell you the truth, when you refused to help the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were refusing to help me.’

<sup>46</sup> “And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous will go into eternal life.”