

# On the Rise: Moving Right

Preached by

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Second Sunday of Easter

**For Reflection** *“Without the spirit of the Lord Jesus, we will look upon ‘the least of these’ simply as the least.”*

Sinclair B. Ferguson

**Hebrew Scripture:** *Psalm 2*

Why do the nations conspire, and the peoples plot in vain?

<sup>2</sup>The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and his anointed, saying,

<sup>3</sup>“Let us burst their bonds asunder, and cast their cords from us.”

<sup>4</sup>He who sits in the heavens laughs; the LORD has them in derision.

<sup>5</sup>Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying,

<sup>6</sup>“I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill.”

<sup>7</sup>I will tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to me, “You are my son; today I have begotten you.

<sup>8</sup>Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession.

<sup>9</sup>You shall break them with a rod of iron, and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.”

<sup>10</sup>Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth.

<sup>11</sup>Serve the LORD with fear, with trembling

<sup>12</sup>kiss his feet, or he will be angry, and you will perish in the way; for his wrath is quickly kindled. Happy are all who take refuge in him.

**Gospel Reading: Matthew 25:31-46**

<sup>31</sup>“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. <sup>32</sup>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, <sup>33</sup>and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. <sup>34</sup>Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; <sup>35</sup>for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, <sup>36</sup>I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ <sup>37</sup>Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? <sup>38</sup>And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? <sup>39</sup>And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ <sup>40</sup>And the king will answer them, ‘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.’ <sup>41</sup>Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; <sup>42</sup>for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, <sup>43</sup>I was a stranger and you

did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’<sup>44</sup> Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’<sup>45</sup> Then he will answer them, ‘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.’<sup>46</sup> And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

### **Meditation: *On the Rise: Moving Right***

Today’s text is familiar to most of us. It is one of the defining texts about how Christians should live and relate to others, as a matter of faith. It is a *tour de force* statement of how we are to treat the poor, the marginalized and the outcast. However, even its own time, it was not a uniquely Christian faith obligation. Yet, while it is a major obligation for the faithful, nowhere does Matthew or the Bible suggest that it is our only responsibility. But it is a major one, so let’s pay attention.

The text is also full of images of another time, place and culture with which we have little familiarity. Many words carry a lot of baggage we need to unpack.

I am not aware of any setting outside of church where we would choose to be called sheep or seem to be sheepish. They have a baa-aad reputation. (Sorry, I couldn’t resist:-). They are reputed to be not very smart. They are dependent on others for safety and protection, having many natural predators but no natural defenses. They need help finding the basic needs of life. In the spring, as we are today, they would not still be sporting their Easter grooming; they’d be grubby with shaggy wool, dirty and waiting for their spring shearing. So, sorta, kinda we’d like to be sheep in this story, but in general, not so much.

On the other hand, the goats in Jesus’ culture were not the Greatest Of All Time (Please note I made a sports reference). Nonetheless, this is a rare Biblical text when goats are viewed negatively. Generally, they are most desirable offerings to the Lord. While still needing a shepherd, goats are more independent of caregivers than sheep. Male goats, in particular, are seasonally ornery and smelly.

Both sheep and goats provide milk and meat, some more desirable than others and that desirability is strongly influenced by age, gender and season. Both will eat any grain or green right down to the ground, at least temporarily destroying the earth’s bounty—hence the need to move them from place to place.

Truth be told, we are not going to learn much about who we are called to be by studying the nature of the beasts, with one stunning exception. We need to acknowledge our need of a protector, a guide, a caregiver and a provider of sustenance. This text is not the introduction to Leadership 101. We need to acknowledge that we are dependent upon the Shepherd. As we are frequently reminded in many settings, “It’s not all about us,” which also means “It’s not all up to us.” If it were, the world would be in trouble.

Instead, we need to look at what these creatures do in order to wind up on Jesus’ good side. We have taken a brief foray into animal husbandry. We are not going to dabble in sociology and the historic understandings of “right” and “left.” We will accept for today that we want to be sheep moving to Jesus’ right.

Mostly, it seems sheep are surprised by where and in whom Jesus might be found. The text provides a fairly comprehensive list of who those in need might be, but there is no evidence these early Christians were carrying around a check list—the poor, the hungry, the prisoner. Rather, the sheep respond, “We didn’t know it was you!” The goats offer a variation on that

theme, saying “We didn’t know it was you we were ignoring.”

There is the difference between the right-leaning sheep and the left-lingering goats. The sheep respond to need wherever, whenever and in whomever they encounter it. They rely on the Shepherd for guidance, protection and life itself. This allows them to move through the world grounded in trust and hope, trusting that it will all shake out in the divine accounting system. The goats, on the other hand, are likely to be doing their own accounting, eking out resources, according to some goat-like logic, without consulting the Shepherd.

Of course, in real life, there isn’t the neat clear division between the sheep and the goats. We fall more on a spectrum than in two easily defined queues. We are more similar than different. The truth is even the most sheepish among us are accompanied by a little *eau de chevre* – a whiff of goat. Our goal then is simply to strive to be more sheepish and less goat-like; to be less worried about categorizing those we meet than serving them; that is, to keep moving right.

I am aware that there is one piece of word baggage I haven’t unpacked yet, and that would be the image of “moving right.” I choose sermon titles very carefully and paid a lot of attention to this one. Among other things, in order not to create cognitive dissonance for you, every time I mentioned “moving right” I needed to gesture with my left hand shifting left from my perspective. (Yes, I practice sermons.)

More importantly, I was not unaware of how the phrase “moving right” might be interpreted in advance. I was not disappointed. Within an hour of my sending this week’s worship info to the 6-8 people it goes to every week, someone inquired, “Is this going to be a political sermon?” My answer to them was, “No, it will not be.” That was the truth at least in the context in which the question was asked. But in the historic roots of the words “political” or “politics” found in the Greek, “*polis*” and “*polites*” which refer to cities and citizens—that is the way people live in community. It is impossible for a Christian sermon not to be political. We are always called to examine how we live in community—among ourselves and with the world around us as citizens of God’s reign on earth.

This text invites that ongoing examination. No one person or one community can be all things to all people, nor should they try to be. Vital communities of faith are moving right, not necessarily trying to serve more and more groups of people.

Rather, vital communities first acknowledge their dependence on their Lord, instead of striving to be independent and self-powered—which will never be enough. They realize they are not the source of their own riches, wealth, gift and grace and so are able to share more freely, and generously, with far less anxiety. Vital communities of faith claim their sheepishness.

Vital communities of faith look to their world and respond to need—without wondering if those needs are on a pre-published list somewhere.

Vital communities of faith see not only the Christ in one another. Vital communities of faith are prepared to be surprised by Jesus’ presence where they least expect it or perhaps didn’t expect to find him at all.

This Eastertide, in our renewed life in Christ, let us move together, move right and be the ones we have been created, called and desire to be.

## **Prayers for Others and Ourselves**

Compassionate God: We draw near to you in prayer and aware of all that we have, all that we need. We pray with attention to your work for healing and wholeness and to the brokenness in us and in your creation.

We are thankful for the gift of faith, which deepens our joy in the blessings of life and sustains our trust in times of challenge. In silence we lift the blessings and challenges of our week to you...

We are thankful for the communities of faith in the world, for the nurture of mutual regard and respect. We are aware of the challenges facing all people of faith, seeking the handholds of tradition while being able to reach toward a new and hopeful future in a changing world. And this day, we pray especially for all communities of faith suffering from violence – bombs, fires, shootings in Muslim, Christian and Jewish communities around the world. We grieve the exploding violence and tit-for-tat expressions of hatred.

In silence, we give thanks for all those who do your healing, reconciling work in the world and pray for our ability to respond to the needs of all who turn toward you. In silence we raise our prayers for the fulfillment of your purposes for all of . We pray with these words and in the service of your son, his hands and feet now in the world, we join our voices in the prayer he taught us

### **The Lord's Prayer**

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.**

**Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.**

**Give us this day, our daily bread. Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors  
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,  
for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**