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Up, down. Left, right. Hot, cold. On, off. We often tend to divide the world into opposites, although in reality there are many categories in between each of the extremes. Partway through hot and cold, for example, we have warm. But we seem to like labels, and often we apply them to people: insiders, outsiders. Republican, Democrat. Believer, nonbeliever.

In the parable for this morning, when Jesus painted a picture of the Kingdom of Heaven, of what God's place is like, he separated people into two categories: right and left, sheep and goats. He gathered the *ethne*, a Greek word translated as "the nations," but which also carries the meaning of the nonreligious people, the Gentiles. In the parable, as everyone gathered before the king, he welcomed the sheep on his right in relation to their acts of kindness—those who provided him food and water and clothing, visited him when he was ill or imprisoned. In the parable, those labeled as sheep didn't even recognize they had done these acts of kindness to the king, for they asked, "When did we see you hungry or thirsty, in need of clothing, or visit

you?" The king replied, "Whenever you did it for any of my people, no matter how unimportant they seemed, you did it for me" (Matthew 25:40, CEV).

The ones on the left, the goats, had done no such acts of kindness, and the king was very disappointed with them. It's interesting that this parable doesn't say a thing about attending church, offering prayers, serving on committees, or even believing in Jesus. One doesn't earn the welcome into the kingdom of heaven based on one's works, for one writer noticed the parable stated,

"Come, you that are blessed by my Father, *inherit* the kingdom prepared for you" (25:34). The kingdom is an inheritance, a gift, not something earned. Moreover, the righteous are unaware of what they have done. "Lord, when did we see you hungry?" They have not been acting in some calculated way to earn God's favor. They have simply been doing what comes naturally for them in caring for their neighbors in need. Their actions are a sign of their relationship with a loving and merciful God.¹

Recently I read about Mohamed Bzeek, a 63-year-old foster parent in Los Angeles who takes care

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of terminally ill children. He got his inspiration from his wife, Dawn, who served as a nurse in a shelter for children with illnesses. Even after she died, he continued caring for ill children. He remembers the first child who died in his care 27-1/2 years ago: “The child’s mom used to work in a farm where they would use toxic pesticides. The baby wasn’t even able to reach the age of 1. It was extremely hard for Mohamed.”

The girl that he is currently taking care of, is a 6-year-old little girl who has been living with him since she was 1 month old. Sadly, she is mute, blind, paralyzed in the limbs and has daily seizures. Even though she can’t hear or speak, Mohamed still talks to her every day. He always carries her. For him, she has a soul and a heart and that is what matters. According to the doctors, she lived longer than expected, thanks to the daily care and love Mohamed gives her.²

Altogether Mohamed has cared for 80 terminally-ill children, an amazing story that will soon be the focus of a documentary.³

Surely his caregiving would place him among the sheep at the right hand of the king, a blessing

and an inheritance that reflect God’s loving nature. I imagine, however, some Christians might object, “He’s Muslim. He’s doesn’t believe Jesus is God’s son. How can he be in the Kingdom of Heaven, for the Bible says...” and then I would hear a list of quotations from the Bible justifying the opinion.

The Bible has lots to say about who God welcomes, and this passage from Matthew paints a picture of a God who celebrates anyone’s act of kindness. The parable doesn’t even mention a belief in Jesus. I think that’s the wonderful thing about our scriptures—they contain numerous voices that catch a glimpse of God’s unlimited hospitality. Yes, God gets upset at the injustice in the world, but God also celebrates the kindness of the world and offers a blessing and inheritance for those who strive to help one another, which I understand is the focus as we once again travel to our imaginary broadcast studio.

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Setting: Two chairs, one for host and one for guest, seated side by side facing congregation. Small table for host.

Doug: This is Pastor Doug once again with WPBA, “Parables Brought Alive.” The past few weeks we’ve had some excellent guests tell us their stories, how they were brought to life in the words of Jesus. Last week we were on location as we talked with a bridesmaid who had run out of oil as she waited for the party to begin. She discovered the value of being prepared, something which our next guest seems to be able to do, for Jesus called him/her blessed. Tell us about yourself.

Guest: Well...I don’t understand why you’re having me on this show today. I really don’t think my story is anything special. I just go about my life doing what I think is best.

Doug: Jesus told a story about a king who separated the sheep and the goats, representing those who helped others and those who did not. I think you were part of the group of sheep, so tell us about the kinds of things you do.

Guest: Well...I see plenty of hungry people in my community, and so I’ve helped organize a feeding program that provides food. I also help with a local food pantry that gathers food for those who face an emergency.

Doug: That must be what Jesus was referring to when he said, “I was hungry, and you gave me food.”

Guest: We also make sure we have plenty of liquids, especially in the summers. It can get pretty hot where we live!

Doug: “I was thirsty, and you gave me drink,” Jesus said in his parable about a king who celebrated acts of kindness.

Guest: I know of plenty of others who help as well, like my friend who volunteers at a clothing pantry. She collects clothes from people who have outgrown them and takes them to this place where they give away the clothing.

Doug: Reminds me of the words in the parable, “I was naked and you clothed me.”

Guest: I have another friend who’s a nurse, and she cares for sick patients every day. Even though

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she's not a volunteer at her job, her role in caring for others is very important too.

Doug: Hum... "I was sick, and you took care of me."

Guest: Another of my friends visits those in prisons, which is not something I'm comfortable doing, but he has a heart for those who have committed crimes and find themselves incarcerated. I would find it difficult to have those conversations, but he has a real passion for talking with them.

Doug: "I was in prison, and you visited me." You too are blessed.

Guest: I never realized that the way we take care of others serves as a blessing to ourselves as well. We may not be able to care for everyone, but each of us has a gift to share.

Doug: Even welcoming a stranger serves as a blessing, for rather than ignoring someone you

don't know who walks in the door of this place, you can at least say, "I'm glad you're here."

Guest: Yes, it seems so simple to help one another. Just use the gifts God has given you to reach out to someone else.

Doug: I think our guest today has summed up well what Jesus had in mind when he told the parable about the sheep and goats: to help one another—another thing that most of us learned early in our lives as children. That's all for this week. Speaking of sheep, we'll be baaaack next week on location in Jerusalem.

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¹ Elisabeth Johnson, www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3872

² Hind Channa, "Going Viral as a Human Angel: Foster-Father Mohammed Bzeek's Only Goal is to Care for Terminally Ill Foster-Children," <https://mvslim.com/going-viral-as-a-human->

angel-foster-father-mohammed-bzeeks-only-goal-is-to-care-for-terminally-ill-foster-children/

³ www.dailysabah.com/life/2018/04/03/story-of-libyan-born-muslim-man-fostering-terminally-ill-children-to-become-documentary