

Last Sunday after Pentecost, Year A
11-23-14
All Saints Episcopal Church

In the name of God, the one who creates us and loves us all. Amen.

When Harry Potter goes to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry for the first time, the Sorting Hat divides him and the other first year students, in an elaborate process, into four houses. Each house has a primary virtue: bravery; hard work; cleverness; or ambition. The house to which each student is assigned forms his or her identity for the next seven years, affecting everything from the classes they take, to sports, to alumni battles for direction of the school, to cosmic contention over good and evil.

On TV programs like *Survivor*, contestants are sorted into 2 teams at the beginning by the show's directors, but as the season moves on, sometimes one or two team members form alliances with each other, sorting themselves over against the other members of their team in an effort to be the ones who come out on top.

As we grow up, we are constantly being sorted into groups. We become bluebirds or redbirds, depending on how well we read. We become popular kids or nerdy kids. We choose sports or academics; baseball or football; English or Math. We become Alabama fans or Auburn fans, Republicans or Democrats, domestic car or 'foreign' car drivers, private school or public school, Apple or Microsoft. We sort our priorities, our morals, our truths, our values.

In today's Gospel reading, Matthew tells us about the reign of Christ, who sits on a throne, sorting the sheep from the goats; passing judgment on one person after another based on their good deeds or lack thereof; sorting us into a life in heaven or hell. It's not too much of a stretch to move from sheep and goats to people - there are many similarities between our 4-footed friends and us. Sheep and goats, apparently, like us, are capable of forming strong bonds, feeling emotions, solving puzzles and performing cognitive functions. They can share the same pastures and coexist relatively peacefully in the same herd.

But it's also not a surprise that there are problems within any herd, mixed or not: animosities, fights, stealing, butting heads (literally). And we are like that, too. So are we sheep or are we goats?

We are about to celebrate a national holiday where, maybe even more than any religious holiday, family members make a point to get together over a special meal, some traveling long distances, some not seeing each other at any other time but this one afternoon.

Talk about a mixed herd!

We are family. We love each other because we are family. But we might not like each other. I'm sure you have heard others' stories or have stories of your own. There are the 2 in-laws in the family who won't eat the cornbread dressing everyone else likes, so Mom struggles to make oyster dressing for one and dressing with Italian breadcrumbs for the other as well. And then there's grandmother, who drinks a little too much wine at dinner and starts to tell her stories about when she and grandpa drove across the country in their Model-T Ford. Or there's the new boyfriend who comes to meet the family for the first time; he mumbles a lot...and he's not wearing any shoes.

It brings to mind Robert Frost's adage: *"Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in."*

If none of this sounds familiar, I recommend a couple of movies to watch, after which you can count your blessings! Try *Home for the Holidays* or *The Family Stone*.

In my family, we always had friends over, not relatives, because we lived too far away from the rest of the clan. Most of them were clergy types - friends of my father. The conversation was always about church - theological discussions, what was happening in the diocese, and funny stories about crazy parishioners they had known and loved! No arguments, no eye-rolling or muttering under one's breath.

Very pleasant. But unusual. I think I was in Junior High before I knew that anyone watched football on Thanksgiving afternoon instead.

So in this mixed herd that we call the Family of God, we are sheep and goats, but are we really going to be sorted into the good and the bad? We have to do the kind of sorting as we grow up that helps us form our identities, but sorting that is welcoming some and not others into the kingdom of God is not what God is about. We have spent the last 2 Sundays reading stories from Matthew that say this is what the kingdom of God is like, and Jim and I have made the case for those stories to be, in fact, telling us that this is NOT what the kingdom of God is like!

There are some Christians who would indeed like us to be separated, sheep from goats, but they want to be the ones who say who is a sheep and who is a goat. And their sorting is based strictly on their own interpretation of what is right and what is wrong, not what we know is just and right. But just because I would end up being a goat cast into Outer Darkness does not mean I am speaking on behalf of what would be good for me!

There are many other images scripture gives us for the kingdom - the lion and the lamb lying down together, the loving father who throws a party when his prodigal son returns, the wedding feast full of strangers, the Good Samaritan who cares for his enemy, the Father's house with many rooms, and here on the reredos behind the altar, the promise from Jesus that all will be lifted up with him.

We are all members of the one Human Family, and therefore all members of the one Family of God. The sister-in-law who drives you crazy, Uncle Sam, who has bad breath and funny hair growing out of his ears, and Grandmother, who falls asleep at the table...all part of the family. There's Creighton, 'our' homeless guy who cooks meals in his crockpot outside the door at the end of the Parish Hall...part of the family. And the crazy man who lives next door to me...part of the family. And all those we don't know, still belong to the family.

All of us are beloved of *God*, sheep and goats. No sorting in the kingdom of *God*. When you come to the table in a few minutes, where all of us are included, too, take a look at the figure of *Christ* behind the altar. His arms are not folded in judgment, but open in welcome for all. Thanks be to *God*.