

Ezekiel 34:11-22
Matthew 25:31-46
November 20, 2011

Undercover Boss

Perhaps you have watched an episode of the reality TV series called Undercover Boss. Each episode of the show features a high ranking Executive Officer or sometimes owner of a corporation going undercover as a low level or entry level employee of the company. Since some of the CEO's are well known they sometimes have to alter their appearance and they always come in with a fake name , ID and background check. The Camera crews are explained by telling the employees that the executives of the company are in a competition with executives at other companies for an award for how they treat entry level employees. The undercover bosses spend about a week working in their own company and of course they face challenges and predicaments. Most of the time they seem to discover outstanding dedicated employees who work very hard but they also come across less productive workers. Occasionally the undercover boss discovers a real stinker of supervisor or worse an abusive one. Most of the Executives on the show come away with a far better understanding of how their company works or how poorly it

works and most of the time they come away with a deeper appreciation for their employees. What about your boss, or the supervisor four levels up, or the chief? Do they appreciate you? If you don't have a boss; what about your partner, your life partner or your colleagues? Do people really understand how hard you are working? Maybe you could turn to another person in the sanctuary and tell them. Are you appreciated? Do people understand your work or how hard your work? Maybe you need to work harder. Go ahead and choose one or two people and talk for a minute.

I was reading a blog on Tuesday night about our text from Matthew 25 and it struck the writer that Jesus is an undercover boss;¹ not only did he go undercover and evaluate the goats and the sheep; he's gone undercover and he is studying us. I kind of liked the comparison but maybe we are getting anxious. This scene from scripture has a way of getting your attention. Now we are left to ponder what Jesus our undercover boss might say about us on camera. We are getting a performance evaluation and we might be employee of the month. We might need continuing education and

¹ Christine Chakoian Reflections for reign of Christ, Nov 20, 2011 Christian Century.org

retraining. I sure Jesus doesn't have a People's republic of China re-education camp in mind for me.

A little context might help us to understand this passage of scripture. When Jesus shares these words he is sitting on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem and he is teaching his inner circle just days before his arrest and crucifixion. He knows his time is near and he is imparting last minute crucial information to his most trusted. He has been speaking in parables about the long term future and the Kingdom of Heaven. He has been preaching about ways to be a faithful disciple; and here we have in Matthew, the New Testament's only detailed description of what happens to us when we get our final performance evaluation. Some people take this passage literally and they call it Judgment day.

Some people teach that this paragraph is about the judgment of non Christians but why then would Jesus be sharing this exclusively with the 12? Nice try but No this is for our ears. This is for the church. Jesus is laying out a metaphor here. Our undercover boss has an eye on us. We are accountable for our behavior. Jesus is running blood tests and monitoring our physical activity, listening to our heart. This wellness check is going into our

medical file. A change in diet and attitude will apparently be required.

So we sit down with Boss Jesus, we are across the table from the one who has gone undercover on us and we get our evaluation and we are surprised. Whether we are a goat or whether we are a sheep we are surprised by these words. When you did it to one of the least of these who are my brothers and sisters, members of my family, you did it to me. Those of us who helped the hungry, those of us who clothed the naked are just as surprised by Jesus words, as those of us who turned away from people in prison and those of us who let the thirsty go dry.

It is still common for sheep and goats in the Middle East to graze together during the day, and to be separated at night. The deal is that sheep and goats sleep differently and react differently to the cold - they require different care at night. Jesus was using an illustration that was common to the lives of first century Palestinians - no one could miss the poignant point of separation.

Right and left were also common terms in both Jewish and Gentile culture for the favored and the unfavored position. In ancient culture, the left hand was the toilet hand. The right hand was the one

with which you reached into the family platter to get your food. For the goats to be on the left this was very unfortunate. But the purpose of this story is not to predict the future; that is something Jesus regularly refuses to do. The purpose of the metaphor is to surprise us now. Things are not what you think; the Boss is watching. Ebenezer Scrooge bargains with the ghost of Christmas Future. “Before I draw near to that [grave]stone to which you point said Scrooge, answer me one question. Are these the shadows of things that WILL be, or are they [only] shadows of things that MAY be?”²

What you do for and to the least of these the prisoner, the hungry, the homeless, the sick and the oppressed, you do to me. The God of Jesus , God as God is described in the Bible , is not a remote supreme being on a far away throne up there above the clouds out there somewhere in the mysterious reaches of the universe. Jesus said, God is here, in the messiness and ambiguity of human life. God is here particularly in your neighbor, the one who needs you. You want to see the face of God? Look into the face of

² A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens, Puffin Books, Penguin Books NY 1994 page 113 word order adjusted.

the of the least of these, the vulnerable the weak, the children³. We are called to protect those who cannot protect themselves. We are not called to list our excuses, we are called to act.

Is there a word here for the football culture at Penn State University and other schools? Yes, we are called to protect those who cannot protect themselves even if it might turn our world upside down. That child abuse, so blatant could be allowed to continue in the locker rooms of that school is nothing short of obscene and horrific beyond its illegality. Yah Ok Mr. Goat on the left, go ahead and tell undercover Jesus that you reported it to your superiors, you did your duty. Let's see how that works for you. We are called to protect the least of these; even when it's inconvenient, even when your empire is threatened. The Kingdom of Football was so powerful at Penn State; it created a culture that refused to recognize truth and injustice. That this went on for years illustrates how self interest and self absorption can interfere with our call from Jesus. It's easy to make excuses, to turn the blind eye, to place self over others.

The Media circus around the accusations against Presidential Candidate Herman Cain was the typical feeding frenzy; followed by

³ John Buchanon in Feasting on the Word Year A, Volume 4 Westminster John Knox, Louisville 2011 page 334

the typical backlash which included Cain seeing his fundraising explode in success and his poll numbers staying steady for weeks until Newt snuck up on him. OK Mr. Candidate You did not grope at those employees and harass them, funny how your corporation settled with them? Performance review is in and Herman Cain needs to visit the Human Relations office. I could have told you that it was going come to down to Mr. Cain accusing the women of lying and making up stories. I could have written it down and sealed it in a envelope several weeks ago. Why do we blame the victims? We are called to protect the least of these and that involves facing reality. We've been there with President Clinton and don't need to go back.

I read in the Washington Post that now 56% of the nation views the new national medical plan negatively. The political right in America has successfully labeled it disparagingly as "Obamacare" and are laboring for repeal. It's telling how the 46 million people in our nation who previously had no medical insurance were overwhelmingly women and children. The pull yourself up by the bootstraps theology in this case is the profession of an ignoramus. Toddlers and children can't get jobs. Jesus our undercover boss

calls us to protect the least of these and that involves facing reality. The trickle in trickle down has not been flowing.

According to this telling in Matthew, Christ will issue performance reviews in accordance with our response to human need. God's sorting does not depend on the knowledge we have amassed, the fame we have acquired, or the fortune that we have gained. God's looking at the outflow; the help we have offered, the ministry given, the gifts personal and financial that we have granted to the presence of Christ in a needy wanting humanity. Feeding the hungry, quenching thirst with clean drink, welcoming a stranger, visiting the sick or imprisoned are things that anybody can do. The basis for evaluation is a simple case of giving. It is within our means to be on the "sheepsides" of the throne of glory.

As the sorting goes, both the sheep and the goats were surprised at what Jesus told them. Those who helped did not really think they were serving Christ, and thus piling up the chits and chips in the mythical Saint Peter's book of reckoning. They helped and served because they could not help themselves from helping and serving. It was the natural instinctive, quite un-calculating reaction of

a loving and faithful heart. It was spontaneous outflow of grace in response to God's Extravagant Generosity .

The whole attitude of those who failed to minister, the goats, was that if we knew it was Jesus, we certainly would have been spurred into action, gladly assisted, but we thought they were just people. There are those who will serve if you give them great gobs of thanks praise and publicity. But aren't the most exciting or successful ministries in the church the ones that are led and supported by people who work with an inner joy and satisfaction that comes way before the thank-yous? When we get separated from the sheer joy of serving a wonderful God and turn to plotting for placement in the banquet of heaven - then I think we are in for a goat's surprise. The personalization and privatization of religion at the expense of mission is to pay no sovereignty to God. Jesus counts the needy as his family. Faith is not the filling out of the friendship register. It's not about a check on the attendance record. Without ministry, creeds and church attendance are mere head games. Mission is Spirituality. When we respond to God in all these ways we proclaim God's sovereignty.

Mother Teresa has offered the following prayer. Dearest Lord, may I see you today and every day in the person of your sick and needy and while nursing them minister unto you. Though you hide yourself behind the unattractive disguise of the irritable, the exacting, the unreasonable, may I still recognize you and say, "Jesus my patient how sweet it is to serve you.

Jesus Our Undercover Boss, His spirit rests in those who need our help.