

One Thing

In the movie *City Slickers*, three New York City friends sign up for a dude ranch experience out West, where they meet an intimidating trail boss named Curly. One night, Curly opens up his tough-as-nails exterior long enough to reveal his philosophy of life.

It all boils down to one thing, he tells them. One thing. Curly then suddenly dies without telling them what that one thing is. Part of their quest in the rest of the movie is trying to discover what that one thing is. The movie implies that this is a quest for each of us.

We used to wonder about my dad's unusual way of relating to his grandchildren. Sooner or later, he would confront each of them with THE QUESTION: *What is your philosophy of life?* It wasn't an idle question; he expected a thoughtful answer.

All the grandkids went through this intimidating rite of passage sometime during their teens. The older ones would warn the younger ones that it was coming. But despite our misgivings at the time, I think it turned out to be a useful exercise.

Because if there is one thing that has not changed in my conversations with confirmation students over the years, it is this uncertainty about the ultimate meaning of life. How we deal with that issue will have a profound effect on our lives, and many people could use direction.

I am getting to age where I think about this more and more. At its core, what is life really all about? Is there any insight or wisdom I have gained from my time on this earth about the meaning of life that I think would be worth sharing, that I would like to leave behind for my children, grandchildren, and others, that might help them discover their purpose sooner rather than in the later stages of life.

What about you? Do you ever try to come to grips with that one thing that defines life for you? Do you think about what you have learned regarding the purpose of this creation and your part in it? If you had one last chance to articulate that one thing that life is all about, what would you say?

I imagine Jesus had some of those same thoughts about passing on what he understood about the meaning of life. Given that his time on earth was short—that his ministry lasted only three years--these thoughts took on a great urgency.

The Gospel reading for today marks the end of Jesus' teaching ministry in Matthew's account. This is the last formal lesson Jesus taught. That gives it a special place in the Scriptures. How does he want to wrap up his teaching ministry?

With all of his insights on the meaning of life, what is the one thing he wants to leave to those who are to follow?

He starts out his final lesson in a very dramatic form, by painting a Judgment Day scene. It's the very scene we refer to in our Apostles' Creed, when we say that Jesus will come again to *judge* the living and the dead. It is a scene of blinding brilliance--with the Son of Man, surrounded by a host of angels, appearing in all his glory before the nations of the world, who are massed before him.

Jesus doesn't tell us what the people are thinking as they assemble. Do they know this is it—the big moment when everyone's eternal fate will be revealed? If so, they must be incredibly anxious. There is so much riding on what happens next.

Jesus supervises a separation—something like what a shepherd would do in sorting the sheep from goats. You can be certain the people are carefully observing who ends up in each group, looking for clues as to which might be the favored one.

I would imagine they get even more puzzled and nervous when they see no obvious distinguishing features between the two groups. From where they are standing, those who are labeled goats look just like the sheep. There are people of wealth and power in both groups, distinguished scholars and religious people in both groups, failures and losers in both groups, friends and enemies in both groups.

Confusion reigns. What is the basis for deciding who gets in to heaven and who does not? Nobody in this whole crowd of humanity can figure out what the criteria are. Even when Jesus begins explaining the process, his explanation makes no sense to them.

We can be certain that many of those in this crowd of nations have their own ideas about what the judgment criteria should be. They are convinced there must be a rating system based on a whole list of qualities.

Among the things to be considered include:

- faithful attendance at worship,
- strict obedience to the laws and commandments,
- appreciation for the blessings God has given them,

- time spent in study and prayer,
- personal morality,
- how much they have created with what they were given,

- their contributions to the church treasury and public works
- the numbers of honors and awards they have earned

the amount of praise they have showered on God,
the public witness they have made to their religious beliefs,
their fierce opposition to evil.

Certainly there is no denying the value of all that stuff. All of those are important elements of life. But it turns out none of those things played any part in the decision.

Jesus makes it sound as though it's all personal. That it's all about him. That he is doling out rewards to people based on how well they treated him personally.

The losers are not only distraught; they are angry. They are convinced they got a raw deal. Some of them were devout, righteous people who always treated God with respect and reverence. This accusation that they ignored Jesus when he was in need is totally unfair. That was something they would never have done. In fact, they have treated Jesus better than most people have.

Standing before the throne of the Almighty, they toss out the red flag to challenge the decision on the field.

Jesus, this is all a mistake! If we had ever seen you hungry or thirsty, we would have given you a feast in his honor—spared no expense.

If we had ever seen you friendless and alone, we would have welcomed you with open arms and made you feel so loved.

If we had ever found you without clothes, we would have given you the shirt off our back.

If we had heard you were in prison, we would have raised an army and led an assault on the place, even dying if need be, in the attempt to break you out of there.

If we had ever seen you sick, we would have moved heaven and earth to care for you.

Jesus does not dispute that. In fact, they are probably right. They would have done just that.

But that isn't what this is about.

Imagine that I treated you like royalty while I let your children suffered horrible abuse. Imagine I fawned all over you and obeyed your every whim, while I turned my back on the misery and grief and agony I saw being inflicted on your family and friends. Do you think that would have any effect on how I feel about you?

The more surprising reaction is that of the sheep. Talk about not knowing how to accept a compliment! Jesus commends you for your actions and on that basis gives you eternal reward. And your reaction is to question it?

It seems you made a mistake, here, Jesus. We don't know if there was a clerical error, or if you're just misinformed, but the truth is, we didn't actually do any of the stuff you said we did. So we don't really deserve this reward.

In the history of religious thought, this is only case I've ever seen where people try to talk their way out heaven. You want to say, "Are you crazy? Don't look a gift horse in the mouth. Just shut up and go along with it." It's not that they are blasé about eternal life; it's just, they don't understand the criteria for entering into it.

This is the most important element of the story, because without this confusion, it appears that the sheep earned their salvation, while the goats failed to earn theirs. Without this mass confusion, the game of life would have been a clear competition that some people win and others lose.

But a fair competition requires rules that everyone understands. The fact that nobody on either side understands the rules tells us that this was not a competition at all. Something else is going on here. It's not the rules that ultimately matter; the one thing that matters in this story is the relationship.

God seeks relationship. God created us out of a need to share love in relationship with others. According to Jesus, the meaning of existence boils down to one thing: do you want to be in that relationship or not?

Before we can answer that question, we have to know what it means to be in relationship with God. In the person of Jesus, God says, "*I am in and with every human being on this earth. But I am especially with those for whom life is difficult. With those who are suffering, in need and in pain.*"

"My mission on this earth is to restore sight to the blind, feed the hungry, rekindle hope in the hopeless, bring good news to the poor, comfort the grieving, and heal the sick.

"That's who I spend my time seeking out. When I find these people who are most in need, that's who I hang out with the most. That's who I am always going to spend the most time with. That's who I am, take me or leave me.

You are most welcome to hang out with me. I would love it if you would. We'll have a great time getting to know each other, and in building a creation that is all it was meant to be.

If you don't care for the company I keep, you don't have to join me. That's your call. Just know that it stands to reason that if you don't want to be with me where I am in this world, you're not going to want to be with me in the next. Because I am not changing. This is who I am and who I will always be."

The sheep in this story got to be with Jesus not because they mastered the doctrine or the law or any other set of requirements. They got to be with Jesus because they wanted to be. Because Jesus changed their lives so that they became people who lived in the grace and love of God.

They were living so fully in the love and grace of God that it didn't occur to them to act any way other than what they did toward their fellow humans. All they wanted to do was to keep living in that grace.

They wanted their relationship with God to grow. They spent time with God, and the result was they shared so many warm memories. *Remember when we fought for those people who had no one to advocate for them? Remember when we shared with people who had nothing to eat?*

Remember that time when we found shelter for that homeless person?

Remember when we worked together for prison reform?

Remember when we had the backs of those who were strangers, without friends in the world?

It was a blast and I want to keep doing that with you. I like how close we have become doing that and I want to be with you forever.

As with all these End Times stories, this is not meant to be a sneak preview of the game day action at the Last Judgment. It is a story, the last story Jesus told at the end of his ministry, to answer the question, "What is the one thing that gives meaning to all of life?"

The answer is not what anyone expected. Judgment Day is not what anyone expected. It is not the ultimate turning point. In fact, nothing really changes on Judgment Day. God doesn't make any decisions.

It isn't God who creates the separation between sheep and goats. The goats chose whom they wanted to be with. They decided they would rather impress God from a distance than live with God amid all that messiness.

The message of this story is that there is no audition for eternal life. As the Gospel of John says, Eternal life is living with God. The invitation is given to all people to do this.

Ultimately, the meaning of life boils down to one thing. Do we want to live in a relationship with God? Do we want to be with God or don't we? God says, if you want to be with me, you know where to find me—with the downtrodden, the powerless, the lost, the sick and the hurting.

If we are not interested in living with God on this lifetime, if we don't like the company God keeps or have no interest in visiting the places where God hangs out in this world, it means we aren't much interested in living with God. And God does not force people to spend time in God's company, now or in eternity.

The sheep who enter into the joy of the master at the Judgment have already been living in the joy of their master, wherever that takes them.

The good news for them is in discovering that nothing is going to change on Judgment Day and that, through God's grace, they can continue to live where they enjoy being, with God, forever.