

THE LAST ROUNDUP

A SERMON FOR MY LAST SUNDAY  
AS INTERIM PASTOR OF  
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
MARIANNA, FLORIDA  
TED W. LAND, INTERIM PASTOR

MATTHEW 25:31-46

My heroes have always been cowboys. I grew up wanting to be a cowboy, and horses have been my hobby, maybe even my passion, for more than thirty years.. So when I read the wonderful text that is literally the last parable of Jesus, I am reminded that what He is talking about here is the last round-up. Gene Autry and Roy Rogers sang that song about headin' for the last round-up, and more recently, so did Johnny Depp.

Bill Williams, who served as the church treasure of the Arcadia Church, from which I retired, was an old time Florida Cracker Cowboy. Bill told me the story of the last roundup down there in Southwest Florida. It was in the late 1940's, after the fence law had been passed. The Babcock Ranch had leased all of the land west of Highway 31 to the state as the Cecil Webb Wildlife Management area, and all of the cattle from that great ranch, and from the Lykes Brothers Ranch, and all of the other cattle "outside the fences" were rounded up and driven to the Lykes Brother's packing house in Ybor City. They had to ford five rivers, wading or swimming, to get there.

The chuck wagon for that cattle drive was pulled by a pair of big oxen, who had served that purpose for many years. Bill said when they reached the packing house, they unhooked those giant, gentle beasts from the wagon, and sent them up the ramp into the slaughter house along with all the rest of the cattle from the open range. Bill said he knew he was seeing the end of an era, truly, the Last Roundup.

I suppose in a way today is the last roundup for me: my last time to stand in this pulpit on a Sunday morning as your interim pastor. When I stand here next Sunday, it will be just as a pulpit supply preacher.

I want to tell you that I have loved being your interim pastor. I have said, and I mean it, that this will be the only interim pastorate I ever do. How could anything ever measure up to what I have experienced here?

Polly and I have come to love you, and we hate to leave you. We will always have friends here. We will always feel welcome here. But there comes a time to leave, and that time is here.

Jesus knew that His time with His followers was growing to an end, and so He began to teach them parables that would prepare them to go on without Him.

The three parables in Matthew 25 are parables about the kingdom of heaven. The first of our parables in chapter 25 gives a lesson from the ten bridesmaids that no one knows when the bridegroom is coming. The second parable tells us that we will be held accountable for how we use the talents that God has entrusted to us. This parable draws the line between the sheep and the goats. It is the judgment on the nations. It sets the standards by which we put our faith to work, and live out our Christianity. It also sets the standards by which we will be judged as Christians.

As I reflect on forty years and more of ministry, I think about the people that have been helped, the poor and needy that have been ministered to by the churches that I have served.

When I think about feeding the hungry, I think about all of the people who have been fed by the churches I've served.

We fed them in Mississippi through Meals on Wheels in my first pastorate, and a Congregate Dining program in my second, and Polly was instrumental in starting both those programs.

But nothing in my first forty years of feeding the hungry matches up with what this church, through its Food Pantry, accomplishes.. Hundreds each month. They begin coming before daylight, perhaps out of fear that the food will run out if they are late. It never has. Never. There has always been enough, even if some days folks had to run down the hill to Winn Dixie to pick up whatever canned goods were on special that week!

This church has fed the hungry.

When I think about giving drink to the thirsty, I remember the days after Hurricane Charley, when the church I served had more bottled water in its fellowship hall than the state had in its warehouse in Tampa, and how no one went thirsty.

Our neighboring synod of Living Waters, the churches in Mississippi, Alabama, Kentucky, and Tennessee, have a joint mission of providing clean water for the world in the name of Jesus Christ, and they drill wells and provide water treatment plants all over the globe. You may hear more about that in days to come.

We have welcomed strangers, visitors, yes, in every church that I have ever served. This church does that extremely well. Keep it up. Keep greeting the one whose face you don't recognize. .

Clothing the naked? We've let other people handle clothing but folks in this church have been very generous in donating clothing to those who see that it gets to the needy.

I remember in my first pastorate, in Aberdeen, Mississippi, after the Tombigee River floods of 1973. We received a shipment of clothes from Hyannis Port, Massachusetts, and used the formal dresses and tuxes and dinner jackets to outfit the whole junior and senior classes so that no one had to buy a dress or rent a tux for the prom that year.

And the riding habits we gave to the 4-H horse club, which won a state championship a year later, in no small part because they were so well-turned out.

In Leland, Mississippi, we clothed a Vietnamese Refugee family, and the women of the church were disappointed and a bit offended that the three little girls and two women in the family did not wear their pretty new dresses to church on Sunday, but continued to wear pants. It was only after several weeks that we learned that in Viet Nam, only prostitutes wore dresses!

I remember the big clothes closet in the upstairs of the church I served in Montgomery, West Virginia, where countless people came every week to get clothing. Yes, the naked have been clothed.

Visiting the sick? I guess I've always done it. Hospital calls, nursing homes, hospice patients, visiting shut-ins, that has been a part of my ministry for the whole forty years and change, and our elders have done that job as well. Charlotte Hunter and her flower ministry will be sorely missed, but our church Youth have undertaken to keep that ministry alive, and I can't think of anyone that shut-ins would rather see than one of our attractive, articulate, teenagers.

Visiting those in prison? I confess that I've been slack in jail and prison ministry. I've trusted my friends the chaplains to do that. I actually tried to visit a prisoner in the Federal Correctional Facility here a couple of years ago, and was rebuffed in my attempt. But you know, I began in ministry visiting prisons, preaching in prisons, in East Tennessee, back in the early 1960's.

So when I come to judgment day, to the last roundup, I am pretty much convinced that the churches I've served, and I myself, have been faithful, and can stand amongst the sheep and not amongst the goats.

In his novel, *Cutting for Stone*, Abraham Verghese sets the story in a mission hospital in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The hospital is operated by an order of nuns, and a Matron is in charge. Like many such missions, though it is nominally Roman Catholic, it receives support from many churches and individuals of many denominations.

One of their major supporters is a large church in Texas. Mr. Harris, the chair of the mission committee of the church, comes to visit the Mission Hospital, pronounced Missing Hospital by the Ethiopians, and is shocked to discover, among other things, that the hospital is only using one operating room because three are filled with the Bibles that have been sent, more Bibles than there are literate people in Ethiopia.

He says, "My intentions..., I hope the committee will understand, were good. We...hoped to bring knowledge of the Redeemer to those who do not have it."

*Matron let out an exasperated sigh.* "Did you think they were all fire worshippers? Tree worshippers? Mr. Harris, they *are* Christians. They are no more in need of redemption than you are in need of a hair straightening cream."

"But I feel it's not true Christianity. It's a pagan sort of..." he said and patted his forehead.

"Pagan! Mr. Harris, when *our* pagan ancestors back in Yorkshire and Saxony were using their enemies' skulls as a plate to serve food, these Christians here were singing the psalms. They believe that they have the Ark of the Covenant locked up in a church in Axum. Not a saint's finger or a pope's toe, but the Ark! Ethiopian believers put on the shirts of men who had just died of the plague. *They saw in the plague a sure and God-sent way of winning eternal life, of finding salvation.* "That," she said, tapping the table, 'is how much they thirsted for the next life.'" She couldn't help what she said next. "Tell me, in Dallas, do your parishioners hunger like that for salvation?"

Harris had turned red. He looked around as if for a place to hide. But he wasn't completely done. Men like him become stubborn with opposition, because their convictions were all they had.

"It's actually Houston, not Dallas," he said softly. "But, Matron, the priesthood here is almost illiterate—Gebrew, your watchman, doesn't understand the litany he recites, because it is in Geez, which no one speaks. If he holds to the Monophysite doctrine that Christ had only a divine nature, not a human one, then—"

"Stop Mr. Harris, do stop," Matron said, covering her ears....When you look around Addis and see children barefoot and shivering in the rain, when you see the lepers begging for their next morsel, does any of that Monotheistic nonsense matter the least bit?...God will judge us, Mr. Harris, by what we did to relieve the suffering of our fellow human beings. I don't think God cares what doctrine we embrace." P. 154

And Jesus said, "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."

Let us pray: Lord, in the last roundup, on judgment day, may we be sorted amongst the sheep. Amen and Amen.