Blair and I attended our local Kiwanis Club meeting last month and heard about the Deen Day Smith awards - an award sponsored by the Statesboro Herald and given to those in Bulloch County who deeply care about their community and neighbors, people who give and give without need of reciprocity. As Joe McGlamery described the honorees, he noted that to a “t,” each person was surprised they were nominated for such an award and that they didn’t want a fuss about it. *I’m only doing what we’re all called to do. I’m only trying to do right by our community. It’s how I was raised. I don’t need an award for it.*

I hear echoes of this in our text from this morning. When Jesus tells the disciples about the judgment of the nations, his words are poetic and parallel. There will be a separation - it is to come, it is not yet, there is still time. But - it will happen, he wants them to know. The nations will be gathered and the Son of Man will separate people one from another as a shepherd separate the sheep from the goats. The litany begins each time: *I was hungry and you gave me food or I was hungry and you gave me no food. I was naked and you gave me clothing or I was naked and you gave me no clothing.* A litany followed by response, first from the sheep and then the goats. The sheep take the time to name the care extended, articulating each action, proclaiming each tenderness and all at once, wondering when this took place:

*When was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food,*
*or thirsty and gave you something to drink?*

*When was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you,*
*or naked and gave you clothing?*

*When was it that we saw you sick*
*or in prison and visited you?*

The goats repeat the questions posed by the sheep (a literary clue if there ever was one): *When was it?* Although when the goats ask it, they truncate it, collapse it into one long question - *When was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?* For the goats cared not about the care and tenderness extended but about the lowly state of people other than them. When was it that we saw you so desolate and desperate and without? Tell us, Jesus! We want answers so we can amend it. Show us so we can rectify it.

The questions are not the same, although they are repetitive. One is surprised, humbled. One is incredulous at a missed opportunity for glory. One is a vessel, open and emptied. One is a shield, built from years of ignoring context and protecting oneself from what could be. One is ever-ready, and one
is always a step behind. One is not unaware but rather immersed so deeply that their hearts are one with others. One is terribly unaware, so separated from what is that they can’t find their way back.

We’re all a little like both, are we not? Well, some of us are a bit more goat like than others (especially preachers) but we all have our sheep-like moments and our goat-like decisions. It is easy to hear this story and feel damned to the fires of eternal punishment but I’m not certain Jesus is trying to scare you into a life of caring for others. That doesn’t sound like Jesus either, does it?

To be sure, Jesus does say that’s a possibility. But it isn’t the only one, is it? Again and again in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus draws sharp lines, caricatures of what the kingdom looks like and what it definitely does not look like. Heaven/earth. Good/bad. Wheat/chaff. Sheep/goats. But even in those divisions, Jesus is offering an invitation to cross over and change, to move along the spiritual spectrum, closing the gap between on earth as it is in heaven. Even here, Jesus creates a space for us while holding an urgency, too: the nations will be gathered (so get ready). The king will say (don’t you hear it? You’ll know the question when it is asked of you). The righteous will answer (I want that to be you, and you and you and you, too!). It will come and it is not yet and I am giving you the clearest way forward I can speak. Care for each other in all manner of times and situations. The end.

When it is said like that…it feels outrageously terrifying and impossible and doomed to make me a goat forever and always. Simple? Sure. Possible? Sure. But all of the time? Hm.

Perhaps it is more like this: the kingdom of heaven is like Ruth Coker Burns. Ruth lived in a dark time not so long ago when the AIDS epidemic tore through our cultural understanding of purity, of sexuality, of uncleanliness and of who deserves care. Ruth was visiting a friend at the Little Rock hospital where one of the first AIDS patients in Arkansas was actively dying. Ignoring all protocol and fear, Ruth walked into this stranger’s hospital room to check on him. He kept asking for his mother so Ruth went to the nurses’ station to honor his request. The nurses said to her, “Honey, his mama’s not coming. He’s been here six weeks. Nobody’s coming.” Ruth walked right back to his room and stayed with him for the next 13 hours until he drew his last breath.

When he passed, Ruth called his mother who - terrified, blinded by prejudice, torn - refused to bury him. Ruth, unafraid and filled with boundless love, took his body, cremated it, and buried him in her family’s cemetery.

For the next several decades, Ruth tended to over 1000 AIDS patients, burying over 40 of them next to her own kin. In an interview I heard, Ruth is talking to Paul, the partner of one of her beloved patients who says, "You were the only person that we could call. There wasn’t a doctor. There wasn’t a nurse. There wasn’t anyone. It was just you. ... You loved them more than their families could. You loved them more than their church could. Now it almost looks like looking back into another world."
Ruth responds, unfettered and unwavering in her confidence, "It really does. It was such a horrible time. But we're still standing."  

The kingdom of heaven looks like a stranger moving - hands, feet, eyes, body - towards another stranger in need. The kingdom of heaven looks like fear being cast aside in the name of love. The kingdom of heaven looks like a heart that can break and mend and break again and still survive. The kingdom of heaven starts so small - some might even say like a mustard seed - and yet spreads and flourishes and grows beyond our imagining if we but begin.

“We do not have to have the ability to “preach like Peter” or “pray like Paul” to be considered co-laborers in the work of God.” We don’t have to be like Ruth Coker Burns to be a sheep. Rather, we are called to be ourselves which is to say who God made us to be which is to say using the gifts you already have for the kingdom of God.

Because it is about a life of giving love - a rhythm so natural that it eases in and out like breath. A rhythm reflective of the very life God imbued inside of you at the beginning. A rhythm that pulses out without realizing it so that when the Son of Man says - yes, yes, yes - you will be so surprised because you were simply doing what you were made to do.

Poetic, sure. But possible? Yes, yes, Jesus seems to be saying here. I will gather and I am telling you how it can be. And how it is:

The kingdom of God looks like someone coming ‘round the neighborhood with a chainsaw after a storm to help with the debris. The kingdom of God looks like someone ever vigilant about filling the Free Little Pantry so that our neighbors are fed. The kingdom of God looks like a friend coming in off the street and being fed with the bounty we have here at church. The kingdom of God looks like someone writing notes to those who visit, even if we never see them again.

The kingdom of God looks like you. Do you realize it? May it be so. Amen.

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1 "Caring For AIDS Patients, 'When No One Else Would'”. NPR. For more reading, see here.
2 Rev. Dr. Jonathan Walton’s idea