

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24
Psalm 100

Ephesians 1:15-23
Matthew 25:31-46.

Each year I make an appointment with my doctor for no apparent reason. I am not sick, not in pain. I go for my annual physical examination. I drive to the doctor's office, find a place to park, walk the long distance to the office, and wait in the waiting room. They check my weight, height, and blood pressure. They draw blood. It is not the most comfortable experience. It is important that I do this. Having had a heart attack and triple-bypass surgery when I was 52, I need to get my total cholesterol, LDL cholesterol, and HDL cholesterol checked to make sure they are at healthy levels. Diabetes runs in my family, and I found out a year ago that I am pre-diabetic. Because of that, I have changed my eating habits. My insurance company thinks it is a good idea and pay 100% of the charges. They have a financial incentive to have my annual physical. These annual checkups help us stay healthy by catching diseases before they become more severe, and saving money for the insurance companies.

As Lindsay Armstrong, a Presbyterian pastor suggests, Matthew's depiction of the last judgment is like a wellness check. It is not meant to scare us or condemn us but to provide a snapshot of our overall health, development, learning, and growth that should lead to new habits and ways of life. When I get the lab tests, the report indicates the numbers, and whether those numbers are within a healthy range. What we see here in this passage is a test indicating whether our faith is healthy. Just as our doctors want us to flourish, so does our Creator, Redeemer, Judge, and King.

This scene is of Jesus separating the sheep from the goats, the sheep will "inherit the kingdom prepared for" them, and the goats go "the eternal fire prepared for devil and his angels." The standard is whether they fed the hungry, gave drink to the

thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, cared for the sick, and visited those in prison. Notice that the criteria for separating the sheep from the goats does not include a confession of faith. The litmus test is compassion. Jesus calls us to be compassionate for Jesus' ministry was marked by compassion for others. Jesus demands that service be rendered to those in need. If we are doing these things, then our faith is healthy. A healthy faith is one in which we care for the poor and the vulnerable. As Rev. Armstrong wrote, "How we spend our time and whom we actively love and do not love provides a diagnostic image of our overall health."

Our reading from Ezekiel can be seen as God's assessment of the health of Israel. Ezekiel also speaks about compassionate caring and expands God's health check. God has just accused shepherds of eating the fat, feeding themselves, and clothing themselves with wool. They have not fed the sheep, strengthened the weak, healed the sick, bound up the injured, brought back the strayed, and sought the lost. Rev. Jill Duffield, editor of Presbyterian Outlook, wrote, "The text from Ezekiel has God gathering in the sheep who've been unjustly, violently scattered and then God gets to dividing into teams. Fat sheep to the left, lean sheep to the right. Those who've exploited and abused their fellow sheep, gotten fat at their expense, no more. Off you go where you can't harm the vulnerable anymore." God here was not speaking about literal shepherds. "Shepherd" was a metaphor for the kings in not only Israel but throughout the ancient Near East. The sheep were their people. The metaphor is used for it implies that these leaders are to care for their sheep like a shepherd cares for his animals. These shepherds, these kings, were expected to provide for their people and rule them with justice and compassion. However, they were not caring for the

vulnerable, but were looking out for their own self-interests. Doctors warn their patients about unhealthy life styles. If you don't give up smoking, if you don't lose weight, if you don't give up alcohol, if you don't begin to exercise regularly, you probably are not going to live much longer. God was declaring that the reason Israel fell to the Babylonians was because the leaders, the rich and the powerful, were not caring for the poor and the vulnerable, and were gorging on their own self-interests.

This is not the only time God warns the leaders of their self-serving ways, their lack of caring for the vulnerable. It was a common theme found in the Old Testament prophets. The prophets declared that one of the reasons Israel fell to the Babylonians was that the leaders of Israel, the rich and the powerful were gorging themselves, while ignoring, even worsening, the plight of the vulnerable. Israel was not living a healthy lifestyle, so Israel literally died!

When Ezekiel wrote this particular passage, Israel had already fallen to Israel. Ezekiel wrote those words as words of encouragement. When doctors tell us that we need to lose weight, quit smoking, quit drinking alcohol, take your medicine, they are looking out for our health. Just as our doctors want us to flourish, so our Creator, Redeemer, Judge, and King wants us to flourish as a people.

How would these prophetic doctors encourage us today? What would they declare to the leaders, the rich, the powerful? If we are a Christian nation that so many of us claim to be, then do not our political leaders, our governmental leaders, have a responsibility to care for the vulnerable, to be compassionate. They are responsible to God for caring for their sheep. Many say that it is not the government's role to care for the vulnerable. However, I think this passage from Ezekiel, and other Old Testament

prophets, beg to differ. Comedian John Fugelsang declared, "If you don't want your tax dollars to help the poor, then stop saying you want a country based on Christian values. Because you don't." Fugelsang is a catholic, the son of a former nun and former Franciscan Brother!

We live in a democracy. The Old Testament prophets lived in a different context, a monarchy. The political situation today is different. Political leaders continue to be responsible to God regardless of the form of government. Because you and I live in a democracy, we are a government by the people and for the people. You and I must hold our leaders accountable. We need to face the reality that, as a nation, the divide between the rich and the poor is increasing. As a nation, we are becoming increasingly unhealthy! Americans are becoming more and more obese, more and more living unhealthy lifestyles. The rich and powerful are gorging themselves, with little compassion for the vulnerable. We must encourage our leaders with what God sees as a healthy nation. Mahatma Gandhi was quoted as saying, "A nation's greatness is measured by how it treats its weakest members." Pope John Paul II said, "A society will be judged on the basis of how it treats its weakest members." Our senators and representatives, our governors and presidents represent us, and we need to share with them God's expectations of leaders. We must hold them accountable. We must put before them God's alternative reality.

Is your faith healthy? Is our nation healthy? If not, let's do something about it!

Blessing and glory and wisdom
and thanksgiving and honor
and power and might
be to our God forever and ever! Amen.