

The Beacon
December 2017

**UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
OF PUNTA GORDA**
An Open and Affirming Congregation



DECEMBER HIGHLIGHTS

FROM THE PASTOR'S DESK

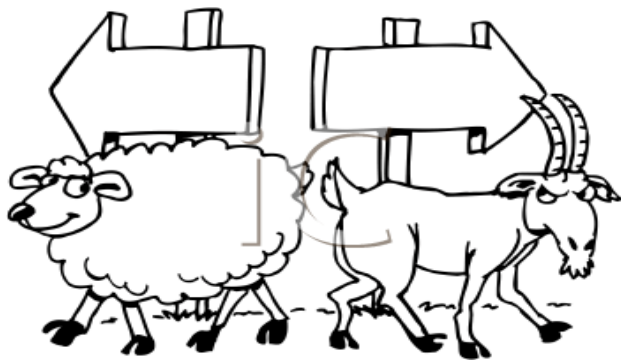
Rev. Mike Ford

Final Exam

I must admit something to you. Matthew 25:31-46 is probably my all-time favorite scripture passage. For me, it passes right by “For God so loved the World...” and “Blessed are those...” to the top of the guiding principles of my faith and ministry journey. I choose to call this section of Matthew’s Gospel “The Final Exam,” as it depicts a returning Christ, come to judge just how well humanity has lived the values he tried to impart to them during his ministry.

There is a clear delineation for how that judgment is displayed. The sheep have cared for God’s people but have been unaware that they had been caring for Christ as they did so. The goats have not cared for God’s people but have reasoned that, had they known it was Christ they were to care for, they would have acted. One side has done Kingdom work. One side has judged others and not considered those whom they encountered to be worthy of their Kingdom work.

A number of years ago (I won’t confess how many); I engaged in a study created around Marcus Borg’s book, “The Heart of Christianity.” It was a twelve-week course that demanded participation regularly. We looked at the power of Jesus’ ministry from scripture from two perspectives, literal and metaphorical. By the end of the study, only two of us had attended all twelve sessions. Of course, one of the last sessions was from Matthew 25:31-46 ☺, the final exam.



It was the first time I had been asked to consider the power of each perspective. I had many colleagues who hold the literal view of scripture: what is on the page of their King James Bible was written by God and not up for interpretation. I met weekly with folks for whom the Bible was plain in its judgment of “alternative” views: those views were wrong; therefore, sinful.

My studies in seminary led me to see the literal consideration of scripture to be only ONE way to read the Bible. It was in seminary that I began to understand that we don’t hold the complete truth about any passage of scripture. An open mind is essential to receiving more light from the pages of the Bible. Coming from that place to consider the power of the words behind the words, I came to Borg. It was important for me, as the facilitator, to be a student at the same time. It not only changed my life, but also how I approach what I consider to be THE essentials of all forms of ministry we engage.

Last Sunday I confronted this passage again. Each time it comes before me it causes me to question: Which am I? Sheep or a goat? It is a sobering and hopefully, humbling question. Have I done Kingdom work? Have I entertained the essentials that Jesus tries to impart to the disciples? Who have I passed by and not served because I was looking for Jesus instead? Who have I judged not worthy of my time? Ouch!

Today I broaden that question to look at the world around me. If we are to care for those “thirsty, hungry, naked, ill, imprisoned” people, do we look at them from the literal or metaphorical perspective? If we see only the literal, we miss some of the most in need of our care.

If we consider only helping people who suffer hunger from lack of food, so we miss those who are hungering for hope? If we serve only those who don’t have clean water, are we missing those who thirst for justice? If we seek to give people clothing because they have none to wear, are we missing those who are stripped naked and vulnerable to systems of discrimination? If we seek only to bind the wounds of a bleeding person, are we missing the person huddled in the corner for fear of repeated abuse at the hands of society? If we see only those behind bars as imprisoned, are we missing those held behind the bars of addiction, domestic violence or mental illness?

For me, now, the power of Matthew 25:31-46 leads beyond seeing those who are easily identified as in need to seek out those the world overlooks. We need only glance at the newspapers or watch the mainstream news to find those overlooked. Every day we hear stories about parents snatched from their homes and put into a system that returns them to the hell they left while the children are left to fend for themselves or are put into strangers’ homes. We

see the carnage of mass killings almost become normal in our society but do nothing about taking the weapons off the streets that allow such massive numbers of people to be killed. We hear of “reforms” that are supposed to ease the suffering of “regular” people but know the truth that they are only to benefit the uber wealthy. We watch people who now have decent health care become hopeless and abandoned to the system that again favors that benefit only being available to the wealthy. We watch helplessly as our government lies to us and allows our elected leaders to pay off their victims of abuse. We sit amazed that an alleged pedophile can be elected to one of our highest offices.

Having just written those last comments, I ask again: Are we sheep or goats? I am certain that each of us WANTS to be sheep, but if we sit by and do nothing to make this a world where none of the above happens, who are we then?

Jesus was clear. There is much Kingdom work to be done. I am truly blessed to be part of a congregation that chooses not to be goats. I am gifted to learn and teach how we accomplish this Kingdom work together. Make no mistake: It is risky work. Most of the world wants us to sit down and shut up about the injustices we see around us. I find it intriguing the image most people have of sheep: docile; stupid; incapable of caring for themselves. I wonder just how our community’s vision of sheep will change when we are engaging in Kingdom work among them? 😊 God bless you for being sheep!

FROM YOUR LEADERSHIP TEAM

MODERATOR- Judy Minier



Happy Greetings of the Season to all as we look forward to December and the good things that come with it! I wish you and your families the happiest of holidays as we celebrate this time of Jesus’ birth. Of course, not everyone is facing joy and happiness during Christmas, so this time of year is also an opportunity

for us to reach out and share our abundance with those who are not so fortunate. It is important to remember why we celebrate the good news of the season and to give to those who have less. *Thanks especially to Emily Klossner for arranging once again the Giving Tree so that we might be helpful to deserving students at Charlotte High School and Middle School. Do you have your gift card ready to put on the tree??*



We are pleased to announce that Mary Tulip has accepted the position of Administrative/Financial Assistant in the church office. We look forward to her sharing her many gifts and talents. Please stop in the church office and to say hello and introduce yourself to Mary.

Speaking of the season of giving, this is a good time to mention that December is the end of our church's fiscal year, which is when we are most cognizant that our annual expenses have exceeded our collected offerings and income. Please watch for upcoming announcements from our Stewardship Committee as you consider your pledge for the coming year. Your Leadership Team works very hard to keep our expenses low and still meet all our obligations, and we hope and appreciate everyone who is able to step forward and keep us solvent through the remainder of 2017 and beyond. If you are planning to present us with an "end-of-the year" contribution to catch up on your pledge, ***now is the time to make that offering known***. Thanks to all of you who have pledged in the past and have kept to your promise of support.

Just a couple of reminders about how we can greet and interact with one another more easily:

1. **Please wear your name tag!** If you need a name tag, be sure to let someone on LT know and you will have one by the next Sunday. And be sure to wear them to coffee hour as this is a great way to connect with your friends and neighbors in the congregation!
2. And for our ushers, if someone is a guest, please be sure **the person signs the guest book with a name and address** so that a welcome card can be sent to our visitors in recognition of their time with us. When you take your turn at ushering, be sure to encourage the use of name tags and have visitors sign the guest book.
3. **Consider signing up for one of our many events** – Girls' Lunch Out, attend the Living the Questions discussions/seminars, or Bible Study. You'll be amazed at how interesting and enlightening such events are! Remember, there is also a new Social Justice committee being formed, so reach out to Jim DeGood or Glenn Weaver if you are interested in supporting this mission and becoming more informed about issues of fairness and racism and how our church can help address inequalities our fellow citizens often face.

REMINDER: The Annual Congregational Meeting will be held January 21 after church. We will present and request approval of the annual budget and other related materials to lead us forward through 2018. The Leadership Team is seeking nominees for the positions of Assistant Moderator, Clerk, and Assistant Treasurer. These posts are essential to the well-being of LT and the congregation to keep us operating successfully and in a credible and thoughtful manner. Please, **please** consider standing for one of these offices. The work is not onerous and we have materials for each position to aid the incoming person to the position. We need YOU!

Next LT Meeting: The December Leadership Team meeting takes place on Tuesday, the 12th at 4:30. Remember, we are here to support our Pastor, our church ministries/responsibilities and operations, and one another in the congregation. The LT welcomes your thoughtful advice and input about what we are doing and what we should be doing. Please see any of us if you

have questions, concerns, or suggestions about how we can more effectively manage our resources or make our church more responsive for our members and the community we serve.

Let us go forth to promote Justice and Peace and the good news of Jesus' birth!

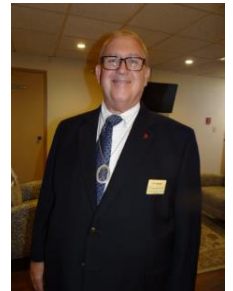
STEWARDSHIP TEAM

The envelopes for the Veterans of the Cross will be distributed in the programs on Christmas Eve. Envelopes will be included in the programs for the 10:00am service and the 7:00pm service. Envelopes are also available at the church office if you would like to pick them up prior to the Christmas Eve services.

MINISTER OF MUSIC - Tim Sperber

We are in the most wonderful time of the year where music surrounds us. The choir has been preparing music for weeks now to enhance our Advent and Christmas services.

I would like to thank our choir, Mary Barnt, Melissa Brown, Lucia and Anamaria Rivadeneira and Carol Schmuhl for the music we enjoyed in our November worship services. December brings special music for us to enjoy in



our worship. Sunday, December 3, is the Hanging of the Greens service. Our Bell Choir under the direction of Joyce Baskovic will be playing in the service. December 17 is our Christmas pageant, "Christmas Comes Alive", the choir, Kathy and Kevin Rivadeneira and Carol Schmuhl will be adding their musical talents to the service. On Christmas Eve our musicians will be doing a special prelude of music. The prelude music will begin at 6:45pm with our Christmas Eve Service to follow at 7:00pm.

Musical blessings.

ENDOWMENT FUND - Bill Ringelstein

The Leadership Team approved changes to the Endowment Resolution that provide a more streamlined process for choosing Endowment Team members and the Chair. This process has actually been in use for some time and this will bring the resolution up to date. The changes to the Resolution will be published and distributed prior to the Annual Meeting now scheduled for January 21, 2018 where the changes will be voted on by the congregation.

The Endowment Team wishes all our readers a most Blessed Holiday Season and may all of God's good things visit your doorstep in 2018.

TREASURER – Melissa Brown

A friend recently forwarded the following story to me:



Last year I replaced all the windows in my house with an expensive, double-pane, energy-efficient style. Today, I got a call from the company that installed them. The bill collector complained that the work had been completed a year ago, and I still hadn't paid for them.

"Just because I'm a senior citizen doesn't mean that I am automatically mentally challenged. Your fast-talking sales guy told me last year that these windows would pay for themselves in a year." I went on to explain to the caller, "It's been a year; they're paid for."

There was only silence at the other end of the line, so I finally hung up. He never called back.

I was reminded of the church's finances when I read this. As a congregation, we are presented with a balanced budget at the beginning of the year: "These windows will pay for themselves." I'm not sure if there is a bit of salesmanship in the budget, but our expectations rarely exceed—let alone meet—our expectations. Several months later, we are being called to make up the difference: In church-speak, collections are less than expenses, despite efforts by everyone—congregants, clergy, leadership and staff—to give adequate donations and keep expenses low so that "the windows will pay for themselves." This year is no different than others. The windows have not paid for themselves. As of the end of October, our current year deficit was \$15,575. November results are not available at this time, but our deficit will have increased. As a newbie to this church, I am repeatedly told that we face a similar crisis every year, and—miraculously—the windows are paid for by the end of every December. Let's hope that this year is no different!

If you would like an easy and cost-free way to contribute to the church, you can set up an automatic payment through your bank by using electronic banking. Payments are mailed from your bank to the church. If you would like to pursue this form of payment, please be advised that the address that should be used for mailing the check is Congregational United Church of Christ, Punta Gorda, PO Box 510838, Punta Gorda, FL 33951-0838. Most banks do not charge for this service—not even for the postage to mail the payment.

DISCIPLESHIP MINISTRY TEAM – Jerome Noble



The Leadership Team has approved the Friday afternoon art class to begin displaying their art on the walls of Faith Hall and the library on a trial basis. Hooks that clamp to the ceiling tile rails will continue to be used for the display, sparing any nail holes in our walls. The Friday art class meets from 1pm-4 pm, cost is \$20 per session, and everyone is welcome to join. All skill levels and media are welcome. Cost is \$20 per session, with a portion of the proceeds going back to the church to defray expenses.

The City of Punta Gorda at a Design Studio meeting with our church representatives tentatively approved the concept of a community raised-bed garden on church property. This is pending our submission of a plan which would incorporate a design and fencing comparable with the standard set by the new gardens at History Park in Punta Gorda. The aesthetic standard appeared to be paramount to the Design Studio. Jim DeGood has volunteered to lead the committee to design and plan this project. If you have a green thumb or would like to dabble in gardening, a 4' x 10' or so raised bed might be a good place to start. We foresee capturing rain water to address our irrigation needs and would likely charge a fee, as does the city, to offset anticipated maintenance and water expenses.

Please note: we are still in need of ushers for December 24. We also need ushers for the coming year!

FELLOWSHIP MINISTRY TEAM - Jan Tulk



On November 12, Marguerite Van Dooren treated us to cake and ice cream for her birthday. We also got to meet her lovely daughter, Margie.

We had our second breakfast potluck before church on November 12. I didn't do an actual head count but estimate that about 40 people attended and enjoyed the feast. So much good food!

Other hosts this month included Carol and John Schmuhl and Carol and Mike Robinson. Thank you to everyone who helped this month.

The December calendar is wide open. Please consider signing up for one of these Sundays.

LIBRARIAN – Sandy James-Nogaj



There will be no Book Talk Tea in December. The next tea will be January 12, 2018, in the Church Library. Thanks to Joanne Arvid for hosting the November tea. We had a good group and some interesting discussions.

Thanks to Herb Henry and Bill Ringlestein for their book donations. James Patterson, John Grisham and Stuart Woods fans will find a treasure trove of new books to enjoy. They are displayed in the library.

I wish everyone a blessed Christmas and a Happy New Year!!

MEN'S BREAKFAST -New Location

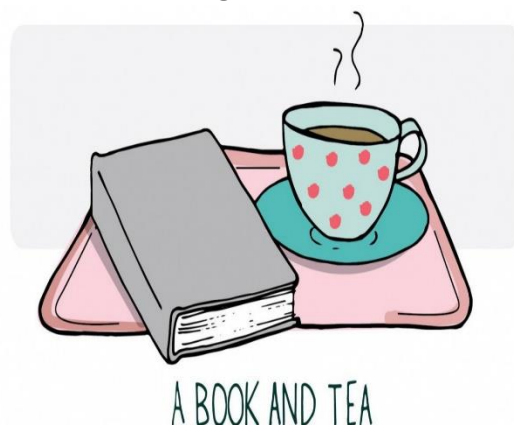
The Men's Breakfast, held every Tuesday morning at 8:00am, has moved to the PGI Grille in the shopping complex behind the 7-Eleven at the corner of Aqui Esta and Bal Harbor. Check the weekly bulletin for updates and cancellations.

SINGLES' DINNER – James Grunden

The December Singles' Dinner will be on December 20 at 12:00 noon at Olive Garden, Port Charlotte. A sign-up sheet is at the kiosk at the back of the church.

LADIES' LUNCH OUT – Neoma Remiger

Watch the up-coming bulletins for the January Ladies' Lunch Out date and location.





CAN YOU IMAGINE IT?

At this time of year, our world is caught up in the rush and crush of the season: gifts and parties, cards and long-distance calls, cooking and cleaning. From morning till night, the days simply slip past with little thought of the meaning behind it all. We've become increasingly removed from the simple story of that long-ago first Christmas. But today, I'm inviting you to slow your personal merry-go-round for just a moment. Right now, right here. Stop and consider how it all began.

Let your imagination take you back.

It all happened more than 2000 years ago. Mary, an unmarried teen, was in her 9th month of pregnancy. She and her betrothed, Joseph, were making a long journey to the small town of Bethlehem. No comfortable, cushioned car carried these two over the rough and rutted roads.

There were no rest stops along the way to help a pregnant woman relax and refresh. Instead, Mary rode a donkey, bumping and swaying with every twist and turn. By her side walked strong, silent Joseph, helping Mary to keep her place on to the donkey's bony back. They exchanged few words. Each was thinking of the amazing assignment for which God had chosen them. When at last they reached Bethlehem, they were tired and hungry. But the town was crowded. Despite Mary's condition, the couple was turned away from the inn. There was simply no room for them.

Can you imagine it?

Joseph led the donkey, bearing Mary, to the stable. There, among the livestock, on the hay-covered floor, Mary's time came to deliver her baby. There were no comfortable beds dressed in clean sheets. No gloved hands reached out to help. No doctors were present. No nurses stood by.

There were only Mary, Joseph, the animals....and God. With no crib, no cradle, no baby blankets, the young parents gently wrapped this precious new life in "swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger." In the fields nearby, a group of shepherds rested among their flocks. Weary at the end of the day, they might have been dozing.

But, can you imagine it?

Suddenly, the heavens were filled with a magnificent light. And, above, an angel appeared to the frightened shepherds. This wasn't CNN. This wasn't the New York Times. This

wasn't a "breaking news bulletin." This was a message sent from the Lord God Almighty directly to a group of humble workingmen. There in the field, with their restless animals looking on, the shepherds were given news of the greatest miracle of all. God had sent them a Savior. And He came in the form of a baby.

Can you imagine it?

The shepherds were told where to find this miracle child. And, the men didn't hesitate. They didn't check the postings on Facebook to see if others had shared this odd experience. They didn't call 911 to report a strange sighting. Instead, they simply believed God's messenger and followed the angels' instructions.

Can you imagine it?

The shepherds made their way to the lowly stable and quietly joined the little scene. They gathered around the tired young mother, the protecting form of Joseph and God's son, that glowing baby boy, lying contented in the humble manger. That setting--not the glittering Christmas lights, not the presents piled under the trees, not Santa in his sleigh--but that simple, unforgettable scene in the stable reminds the world that Christmas marks the birth of God' son.



DECEMBER CELEBRATORY DATES

DECEMBER BIRTHDAYS

December 9	Jim Kirby
December 10	Elaine Erickson
December 12	Emily Klossner
December 12	Fran Yoder
December 15	Mary Tulip
December 15	Steve Rutherford
December 17	Armando Mascarenaz
December 17	Lillian Pils
December 18	Lee Swift
December 22	Sally Benson
December 27	Robert Gaylord
December 29	Susan James



DECEMBER ANNIVERSARIES

December 14	Zoli & Jackie Szeifert
December 15	Donald & Myra Nagel
December 18	Bob & Joyce Baskovic

Did we miss a birthday or anniversary? Please email the office, and we will try to make sure it doesn't happen again: office@puntagorda-ucc.com