



[Rev. Steven S. Billings](#)

Funeral Sermon for Mary Howden
February 21, 2026

Right Hand Sheep

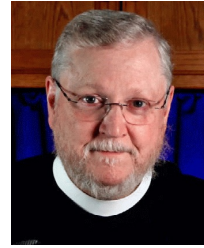
Matthew 25:31-40

³¹ “When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. ³² All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. ³³ And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. ³⁴ Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: ³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; ³⁶ I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.’

³⁷ “Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? ³⁸ When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? ³⁹ Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’ ⁴⁰ And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.’”

The text I’ve chosen for our meditation today is part of a larger passage, and if you keep reading where we left off, the Son of Man in His glory deals with the goats to His left and it quickly becomes apparent that they thought they had done what was expected of them, but they hadn’t. Whatever they had done in life, they had not actually cared for the people in need who were set before them or, at the very least, if they had done so they were doing it for the wrong reasons – either to gain favor or some other kind of reward, not simply to provide for someone in need. And, of course, if they had done nothing at all, passing by without so much as a prayer, that too would have been the fruit of selfishness. The Lord has nothing good to say about these goats and no Crown of Life with which to reward them. What He says to them is, “Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” Apparently, these goats couldn’t recognize Jesus in the hungry or thirsty, in the stranger or naked, in the sick or imprisoned.

The King mentioned in Jesus’ account of the Last Day, by the way, is Jesus Himself, who, after His Last Supper with His disciples, ended up arrested, hungry, and thirsty, nailed naked to a wooden cross in His crucifixion. He was described by the prophet Isaiah as one who “had no form or majesty that we should look at Him, and no beauty that we should desire Him.” Isaiah goes on to say that “He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces He was despised, and we esteemed Him not.” The goats in this life are happy to do



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something for someone sitting on an obvious throne of glory because they imagine some kind of reward, but not for the beaten and bloodied condemned man, thrashed within an inch of his life, left for dead, naked, and nailed to a cross. To the ones who orchestrated Jesus' death He was a stranger, a dangerous outsider who would have no place at their table. What reward could He give who didn't even have a pocket to put a penny in? Regardless of whether that suffering was great or small by human standards, when you see the Good Friday suffering of Christ reflected in the suffering of people around you who are in need and you act upon it, not for a reward but simply because they're in need, then you are like the sheep and not the goats. "Come, you who are blessed by My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave Me food, I was thirsty and you gave Me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed Me, I was naked and you clothed Me, I was sick and you visited Me, I was in prison and you came to Me."

You are gathered here today because you know Mary and you know her to have been a woman who cared for the sick and who would help those in need, and one who would, more than likely, answer along with the rest of the sheep, and say, "Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? And when did we see You a stranger and welcome You, or naked and clothe You? And when did we see You sick or in prison and visit You?" Jesus, of course, is the judge of the sheep and the goats, but when we look at Mary's life, her sheepness is clear to us. As one forgiven by Christ and washed in His blood poured over her in Holy Baptism, and received at this very communion rail in the Lord's Supper for the past 26 years, Mary is one to whom the Lord would surely say, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to Me.'

It's important to remember that there are promised rewards for being a faithful and true Christian, but they're not *earned*, as such; rather, they're *given* as gracious gifts from God by His grace and not by our works. In response to His grace, we're called to be gracious and kind to those around us who are not in a position to repay us for our deeds. The only One who is perfectly faithful and true is Jesus. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords, and while the World sees a humiliated man dead upon a Roman cross, we see the Son of God, the very fountainhead of all mercy and kindness and love, the Source of all forgiveness and grace. And this kindness and love, this forgiveness and grace, is the rod and the staff that comforts us; it becomes the cup that overflows, spilling over onto those in need around us, the very thing that restores our souls when we are brought low in life and what gives us courage in the face of death and evil. Mary, then, was the recipient of God's grace, but also a conduit of that very grace to many, including this humble servant standing before you.

The writer of the book of Hebrews gives us this advice: "Remember your leaders. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith." Now, no one is perfect except for Christ, and yet in this advice you have encouragement to look at how Mary



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cared for others in need and imitate that part of her faith. She may not have talked much about her faith, but she lived that faith by caring for the needs of others. She didn't do it for earthly or even heavenly rewards. Christians do the kinds of things Mary did because they're grateful for the suffering Jesus willingly endured for them, and they want then to alleviate that suffering in the lives of others out of sheer gratitude. These are the sheep on Jesus' right hand, made righteous in Him, who are separated away from the goats into the Father's kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world. Surely, the Lord's hand has been upon them. His right hand held them, and holds them still. In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen