Benjamin Franklin advised us, “A fool and his money are soon parted.”

That’s our fear; especially in the aftermath of an event like the hail storm that did so much damage earlier this year. We don’t want to be fooled. But before the hail could melt, roofers were everywhere! Companies from all over the country descended upon Berks County to offer their services. They knocked on our doors. They offered a free inspection. They promised us that they would make sure that we got a fair settlement from our insurance companies. They wouldn’t let them pull the wool over our eyes, but we wondered if they were wolves in sheep’s clothing.

We know what we mean when we say that (we don’t want to be fooled) but why do we say that; why don’t we want the wool pulled over our eyes?

The consensus seems to be that this phrase dates back to the times when judges and proper gentlemen wore large woolen wigs. These wigs were so large that sometimes they would fall down over the wearer’s eyes, so in time, clever lawyers who had put one over on the judge would boast that they had pulled the wool over his eyes.¹

We don’t want to be fooled, but Jesus’ parable of the sheep and the goats suggests that there will be a day when Jesus reveals that he’s been pulling the wool over our eyes all along. The record of our lives will be reviewed (for good and for ill) and we’ll be dumbfounded: Matthew 25:37–39 (NRSV) ³⁷–³⁹ ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’

And with a twinkle in his eyes, the Lord of heaven and earth will reveal the misdirection he used to pull the wool over our eyes.

1. Misdirection

The best place to hide is in plain sight. We should be easy to spot, but we humans see what we’re expecting to see, and when we’re not expecting to see someone, we don’t see them. Our eyes look their way, but we don’t recognize them.

That’s the misdirection Jesus describes in this parable. Both sheep and goats ask the same question, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry…thirsty… a stranger…

https://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20070217100314AAyQagm
naked … sick … in prison? Surely we would have recognized you and we’d remember you; so Lord, when was it?”

Sheep and goats ask the same question, but there is a difference; a difference that makes all the difference, an eternal difference. The sheep saw the hungry…thirsty…etc. They saw them. They cared for them. They saw their need and they did what they could do; nothing grand; nothing glorious; plain and simple.

The goats did not see the hungry…thirsty … etc. They did not see them and they did nothing for them. Now if they had known Jesus was in their midst; they would have looked; they would have seen; they would have done … something! So Lord, when was it?

Here’s the misdirection: Matthew 25:40 (NRSV) ‘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.’

So, who are “the least of these who are members of my family?” Is Jesus referring to needy members of the Christian community? Is Jesus referring to needy people in general?

Yes, and perhaps the following misdirection will help expand our understanding; rather than defining “the least of these” in terms of the size of their need, we should define “the least of these” in terms of these individuals smallness; their insignificance; they are the ones that it is easy to overlook, to take for granted; the ones we think have nothing to offer us, because they’re different, because they don’t fit our image of how we ought to be, how we want to be.

“The least of these” aren’t what we expect; they certainly don’t measure up to our expectations. They’re right in front us, but we can’t see them; they’re hiding in plain sight.

The funny thing is; it’s not that hard to see them. They are hiding in plain sight after all, so if we can look at one another differently, if we can look at ourselves differently we’ll be able to spot “the least of these” a mile away, and in the process, we’ll see Jesus; he’s here in plain view. Nothing grand; nothing glorious; plain and simple; and he pulled the wool over our eyes.

2. Pull the Wool Over Your Eyes

We don’t expect the wool to be pulled over our eyes; it wouldn’t work if we did; the surprise is essential.

Jesus offers us a surprising vision of what he sees as essential and what he doesn’t. We are so used to understanding salvation in terms of right belief, confessing “Jesus is
Lord,” that it comes as something of a shock to find that, “Who is your Lord and Savior?” isn’t asked. There’s no concern for right doctrine; there’s no concern for morality; “right and wrong” are nowhere to be seen; what is front and center, hidden in plain view, is the priority of day in and day out compassion and kindness.

To be sure: It is not wise to expect any one passage to offer a full and comprehensive understanding of the Christian faith; but, we do well in this age of litmus tests when some are all-too-willing to separate sheep and goats based upon believing a certain way and adhering to a certain moral vision to keep this passage in mind, be challenged by the vision it casts, and let Jesus pull the wool over our eyes once again.

Perhaps following Jesus doesn’t require that we know all the right answers; perhaps it’s OK to have some doubts and questions. Perhaps the point isn’t to get our lives together; perhaps it’s to live together in peace whether we are a sheep or a goat. Perhaps the holiest and most spiritual thing we can do on a Sunday morning is reach out to someone who’s off by themselves and simply say, “Hello.”

Nothing grand; nothing glorious; plain and simple, because the wool is pulled over our eyes.

The great Scottish theologian and Biblical scholar William Barclay included the following story in his commentary on this passage: [Martin of Tours] was a Roman soldier and a Christian. One cold winter day, as he was entering a city, a beggar stopped him and asked for alms. Martin had no money; but the beggar was blue and shivering with cold, and Martin gave what he had. He took off his soldier’s coat, worn and frayed as it was; he cut it in two and gave half of it to the beggar man. That night he had a dream. In it he saw the heavenly places and all the angels and Jesus in the midst of them; and Jesus was wearing half of a Roman soldier’s cloak. One of the angels said to him, “Master, why are you wearing that battered old cloak? Who gave it to you?” and Jesus answered softly, “My servant Martin gave it to me.”

What a surprise, and there are more surprises to come. We’re still distracted by the glitz and glamour of the rich and famous; we’re all too impressed by the power and prestige of the high and mighty; we fear we don’t measure up to the pure and holy. But Jesus is hiding in plain sight; he’s here in plain view. Matthew 25:40 (NRSV) ‘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.’

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Pennside, follow Jesus. Keep your eyes and your hearts open, and get ready to be surprised. Compassion and kindness may just be what it takes to save our souls. Nothing grand; nothing glorious; plain and simple, a glorious misdirection that we can see, because Jesus pulled the wool over our eyes. Amen.