May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, oh Lord, our redeemer. Amen It's called prosopagnosia, and it gets people into a lot of trouble. Prosopagnosia is also called face blindness, and it's a real thing. If you have prosopagnosia, and 2% of the population do, then you are quite unable to remember faces, even the faces of people you live and work with. The Washington Post journalist, Sadie Dingfelder, writes entertainingly about having this condition. "Last year, I was trailing behind Steve, my husband, in a grocery store when he grabbed a jar of store brand peanut butter from a shelf. I plucked it out of our cart and examined the label. I looked him in the face and demanded, 'Since when do you buy generic?' Steve jumped away from me, his eyes wide with fear and surprise. It was an expression unlike anything I'd seen on my husband's face before, because, I belatedly realized, this man was not my husband." I dropped the peanut butter jar and sprinted off, leaving this poor stranger utterly perplexed. When I found Steve in the frozen food aisle, I told him what had happened. "It's because you have the same coat," I explained. "Good thing you have different cars, or I might have gone home with him." I think I might have a touch of this.

Uh, in fact, I'm gonna pretend that I do because it's a great excuse, uh, for forgetting people's names. Actually, it must be really tough suffering from this condition, both the sufferer, uh, and their friends and family. But come to think of it, after reading that famous parable of Jesus about sheep and goats, maybe we're all a little bit prosopagnosic. Let me explain. Sheep and goats. To us, they look very different. Go to a children's petting zoo, and we can all separate the sheep from the goats. But if that petting zoo is in the Middle East, it isn't so easy. Sheep and goats in that region look very similar, and from a distance, you might not be able to tell which is which. It's common for Middle Eastern shepherds to have the two species graze together side by side. Sheep, you see, are quiet, docile creatures, while goats are more stubborn and assertive. If an intruder attacks, the goats will scream and shout and not back down. When it's time to shear the sheep, the shepherd must then separate them from the goats. He stands there, staff in hand, nudging each beast one way or the other, and that's the image that Jesus has in mind as he tells this solemn parable. The shepherd dividing the flock. Sheep go one way, goats the other. And here's where our face blindness comes in, because only the good shepherd can tell them

apart. So, if it's not clear yet, there are going to be some surprises at the last separation. Some people who, in our face blindness, appear sheepy, people we think as great saints, good people, sincere Christians who talk about God and appear to mean it, well, they might not be sheep at all. They might be goats. We are prosopagnosic. We just can't tell. And in the same way, people who appear goatish, those, uh, we think of as irreligious or unspiritual or immoral, heretics or unbelievers, maybe some of them are actually sheep. Only the good shepherd knows for sure. I can imagine standing in heaven and seeing someone I knew years before and saying, "What are you doing here?" And they'll reply, "I was gonna ask you the same question." It's only the penetrating, clear-sighted vision of Jesus that can tell the sheep from the goats. These are important words, convicting words in an age of superlatives and hyperbole, where people are described as the best or the worst, the greatest or the most disastrous, God's person or Satan's person. Here is a solemn reminder from Christ himself to not judge. Sheep can look like goats, and goats can look like sheep So true is this that in the parable, the sheep and the goats themselves don't even know what they are Members of both species are surprised to learn which

group they've been sorted into. Both say, "Wait, Lord, when did we see you and show you kindness or not?" So deep and ingrained is their sheepiness or their goatishness that they're not even aware of it. George Buttrick, a 20th-century Presbyterian pastor nicknamed The Preacher's Preacher, put it this way: "The loving folk were so lowly that it did not occur to them that their daily kindnesses could ever have been a personal service to the king, or that they had done anything worthy of reward. The unloving were so callous, their religion so perfunctory, that they never thought of Jesus as asking for deeds of compassion." Notice how the separation happens. Spot the distinguishing feature of the sheep. It is the act of love. That's the difference. I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you clothed me. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me Here is Jesus describing the sheep. The sheep has a heart that feels the pain of the downtrodden, that empathizes with the marginalized, that stands in determined solidarity with those who lack the resources they need for a healthy, sustainable life. And you can tell that their faith and their love are genuine because they do something about it.

They don't just talk about helping under-resourced people, they get involved. They sacrifice. That's always the test of reality, isn't it? Does it change people? That is the hallmark of authenticity. Does faith compel us to action? Does love force us to serve? And the goats, well, they just don't. The sin of the goats was face blindness. They saw under-resourced people, but couldn't see the face of Jesus in them Jesus says that when the sheep did their acts of kindness, they were doing it to him, not for him, but to him, as if he, Jesus, was literally the sick, the destitute, the prisoner, the starving. Jesus identifies himself so tightly with the hurting of this world that whatever we do or fail to do in relation to those hurting people directly affects him. But I forget. If I saw, uh, the real Christ lying in a shop doorway asking for food, then what would I do? I'd take him to lunch. That's what I'd do. If it were the real Jesus in a hospital bed or the prison cell, I'd be really quick to visit him. And Jesus pulls back the curtain and shouts, "Surprise! It's me." Tucked away in the mountains of Central Europe was a monastery, a monastery that had seen better days. The brothers who lived there were aging, declining in health and in number. It had been many years since they had been joined by a new member. The

reason for their sad state was not hard to spot. Many years ago, they had become self-satisfied. They flattered themselves on the purity of their holiness, the majesty of their worship, the passion of their prayers, and in their journey inwards, they turned their eyes away from the outwards. They lost sight of the small, poor villages around them in the valleys. The monks even began to compete with one another for bragging rights. Who was the most righteous, the most spiritual, the most like Christ? And they began to blame their decline on each other. It was Brother Ambrose's fault for his aloof manner. It was Brother Leonard's fault for his poor cooking, Brother Giles' for his awful singing at chapel. And so, as surely as night follows day, that community of brothers, once so vital, became so sick The abbot feared for the survival of the monastery, so he traveled across the valley to talk to his bishop to seek advice on how to revive the struggling community. As the bishop sat by the fire listening to the abbot, he felt moved to say something that was shocking but wonderful. "Jesus," he said, "is living in the monastery in disguise." Well, this changed everything. The abbot skipped out of the bishop's office, mounted his donkey, and returned to the monastery with renewed heart. He made it home, tied up the animal,

ran into the Great Hall, and called all the brothers together. He gushed the good news that Jesus himself was present in their midst, but lived there unrecognized and unnoticed. Well, this word from God had a profound impact on the brothers. Who could it be? Was Jesus in disguise as Brother James, or was he Brother Cedric? Could he even be Brother Dominic, despite his snoring? And so it was that unable to tell which monk was Christ, every brother began treating everyone else with kindness and patience. They even began to consider the needs of their fellow monks because, hey, this brother who I never got on with and who always knew just what to say to press my buttons might be our Lord. Soon, the atmosphere of the monastery radiated love and peace. Visitors and villagers felt the warmth of the community, and young men began knocking on the doors again, eager to become novices So was the bishop lying, saying something untrue to get the monks back on track? No, he was telling the truth. Christ was there in disguise, and according to today's parable, he is truly there in the people who lack resources they need for a healthy and sustainable life. Let's ask him to take away our face blindness and see him. Let's be healed of our prosopagnosia So I hope I'm not being

presumptuous and speaking falsely for God. But today, I think he has two things to say to St. John's. First, thank you. He saw the thousands of hours that you all put into the bazaar, and the serious amount of money that was raised to give people in our wider community who are under-resourced in various ways. And he says, "Thank you. I see you, St. John's, when you give away 10% of parishioner giving to mission partners," as we are going to do this very week. "You're doing it to me," says the King. But that's not all. The vestry and the outreach committee of St. John's believe that giving just money is not enough. We want to change lives permanently, and that happens in relationships. So please watch for opportunities in the coming months to be personally involved in projects and programs where we enter into the depths of people's lives and watch God at work. Be sheepy, not goatish. Amen.