

Parable of the Goats

This past summer, my extended family rented a house in California, on the edge of the Sierra foothills. Our first full day, we explored the property. It was parched, and a chain-link fence separated us from the goats on our neighbor's field. When the goats saw us, they ran to the fence. They knew what humans are for.

We also knew. We had ends of cabbages and carrots we were sure the goats could use better than the house garbage disposal. A bigger motivation was our resident three-year old, who is at a stage where she loves all things animal. But first I needed to ask the neighbors if it was OK to feed their goats.

Their house was not visible, but I imagined that it connected to the same road as our own. I walked the hundred yards to the road and a bit further until I came to two adjacent driveways. No houses in sight. The nearer driveway was protected by a 12-foot black metal gate, locked and fronted by a sign that read "*This place is politically incorrect. We say Merry Christmas, One nation under God, We salute our flag & give thanks to our troops. If this offends you, LEAVE*" I wasn't offended by any of these things, but they didn't know this, and I noted pointedly that the message did not continue "... and if not offended, then Welcome!"

Finding no intercom at the gate, I decided it would be best to turn to Plan B, trying the second driveway. It had no gate, and it took me another hundred yards before I reached a house, one that clearly did not anticipate visitors. There was a truck and a work area attached to the house, but no front door. Reasoning that the inhabitants had to be able to get into their house somehow, my eyes followed steps up to a porch where I figured there must be a side door. I went up the steps and indeed found a screen with a closed door behind it. There was no doorbell. Should I open the screen door and knock? I judged that this would be a mistake.

Before I could decide on a course of action the wooden door swung open and a lady appeared. I noted she was not holding a shotgun, but her voice was. "What do you want," she said through the closed screen door. I explained my mission, to feed the goats. "Those belong to the neighbors," she said. "You mean the ones behind the big black gate?" I asked. "I don't see how I can reach them." "I could text her," the lady said, but she didn't seem enthusiastic about the idea, and I didn't think she'd represent my cause very effectively. "We just throw slops over the railing to the deer," she continued, pointing to a family grazing not too far away. I recognized them as the same deer that visited our backyard the previous evening. "That wouldn't work," I said. Our baby couldn't get close to them like the goats." Hearing the word baby, the lady's voice put down the shotgun. She didn't open the screen

door, but she spoke more softly, without edges “I’m sure there wouldn’t be any problem if you feed the goats.” A male in a tee shirt came to the door. “You’re renting the big house? Did you know it used to be a hospital?” I did not. We talked a bit more about the house, how much we were renting it for, how big it was. I wished we could have talked further, but I couldn’t think of any excuse to do so, so I thanked them and walked the hundred yards back to the road. We fed the goats, who were very happy. So were we.

I am reminded of this conversation whenever I read in social media the common advice to never open your door to anyone you don’t know. The lady was wary, but she did open her door, and I’m thankful for that. Over the past several years I’ve noticed a sharp uptick of farewells ending “Be safe!” Radio shows now close with “Have a pleasant and **safe** evening.” It used to be that people would wish you good health. Now it’s safety. I could have encountered a shotgun at the end of the dusty driveway. Instead I found people who, in the end, I connected with and who connected with me.

The New Testament speaks of three servants given money by their master to take care of during his absence. Two of them invest the money and upon the return of their master deliver both the principle and more. The third buries the money to keep it safe. He does not fare well in this parable.

Of course the parable is not about financial strategies but rather the need to invest ourselves in the world, even if that may entail risk. My neighbor opened her door, I opened mine, and I think our worlds are better for it.

Well, gotta go. Be... no, check that.... Take prudent risks!