

Christ the King
Last Sunday after Pentecost, Year A
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November 20, 2011
Matthew 25:31-46 *The judgment of the sheep and goats*

Today we have the Church's equivalent of a New Year's Eve celebration. This is the last Sunday of our Liturgical Year. Next week is the first week in Advent – the start of Year B. And we are appropriately celebrating today with our Café St. Stephen's setting, the decorations, and the potluck brunch. We are celebrating the blessings God has given us this past year and how we want to share those blessings with the less fortunate. And this is what our gospel reading is all about.

Today's speech by Jesus is a continuation of his discourse from the Mount of Olives – the hillside across from Jerusalem. He is nearing the end of his journey – the next stop is Jerusalem, his final Passover meal with his disciples, his arrest, trial and execution; although his disciples haven't picked up on that as yet. For awhile now, Jesus has been telling them, and us, what the Signs of the End of the Age will be like. Last week we had the parable of the talents. Today we have the separation of the sheep and the goats. These are judgment stories. Jesus is saying that at the end of the age there will be a judgment. The theme of judgment can be a troubling one. There are many churches that really like to focus on this theme. Their motive, I believe, is to help people avoid being thrown into eternal darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Of course, many go overboard and do this by shame and humiliation, and that isn't the gospel. There are equally as many churches that would rather just avoid the whole subject. It is sometimes very difficult to believe in a God of Mercy judging anyone:

The kindness of God leads to repentance. (Romans 2:4)

But avoiding the issue reflects a lack of acknowledging God's own work of redemption on the cross – His own act of mercy on our behalf that we need to accept. As Episcopalians we believe in God's judgment. It is in our Catechism (ck out pg. 862 in the BCP). It is in the Nicene creed: "He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead..." which is taken from today's gospel. So I don't think we can avoid it.

According to Matthew, at the end of the age, Jesus is not just coming back– he's coming back "in His glory." "In his glory" simply means there will be no mistaking who he really is this time. No possibility that anybody is going to mistake him for someone else. He is coming with all the brilliance of the sun, accompanied by millions of angels. And he will sit on his throne, for this Son of Man is King. He is not a constitutional king as in England, nor as a figure head king as in some Scandinavian countries. This King is Lord of all.

At the end, all nations will be gathered before him. The dead will be raised. The living at the time of his coming will be there. You will be there; I will be there; our friends, neighbors, classmates, and significant others will be there. Our ancestors will be there and our posterity will be there. I'm not sure about our cats, dogs, birds, squirrels and other pets because the

sheep and goats mentioned were not meant to be literal. But I'd like to think they will be with us.

He separates us all into two groups. He'll do it like a shepherd divides the sheep from the goats; sheep on the honored right side; goats on the left. Until the coming of the Son of Man they are mixed together, sheep and goats. It is like the other parable where the wheat and the weeds are also mixed together. We look alike, we behave similarly as well. It would be impossible for us to distinguish between the two – that is why this is God's job.

Did you notice how the separation of the sheep and the goats takes place before either group is told what they have or haven't done, or on what the basis they are separated?

The sheep are told before they know what they've done: "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, take your inheritance, the kingdom has been prepared for you since the creation of the world." Likewise the goats are also told "You that are accursed depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." Both were judged by what they did nor did not do for the hungry, the thirsty, the strangers, those who needed clothes, the sick, and those in prison.

And here is the point of the parable – both groups were surprised, both groups asked the same question... "when was it Lord" that you were hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick or in prison? Both are surprised, but they are surprised for different reasons.

At this point it seems like our judgment, for good or ill, is based on our works. And indeed, many of us are probably feeling, have I helped the homeless enough, have I fed the poor? Have I worked for the injustice that has been dealt against outcasts of society? I know I haven't visited anyone in prison. I'm probably doomed. However, it is not their good deeds that get the "sheep" into the kingdom. They don't earn the kingdom. They inherit it. Inheritance is determined by the giver, not the receiver. There isn't the slightest sense at all that you, I, anybody could inherit the Kingdom of God by doing anything. It is a free gift, as Paul tells the people in Rome, a free gift from God. It doesn't do us any good to keep a score of our deeds in order to qualify for eternal life.

Because you see, the righteous sheep hadn't kept score. They didn't know their own good deeds. They did what they did because of the necessity to help, love, serve, visit, and feed because they had been helped, loved, served, visited, and fed. They were filled with the oil of gladness, the Spirit poured into their hearts, and they simply did what they did. They saw Jesus in the sick, the street person, the prisoners, and the needy and they reached out to help.

The unrighteous goats on the other hand, are quite aware of what they are doing. They keep score of how many times they help others and the amount they give. They make sure their picture gets in the paper for serving at a soup kitchen. They complain about helping people, about giving to others. They only want to help those who are worthy, who make all the right decisions. The Jesus they see has to look like them.

This parable of judgment is a parable about our heart. Is our heart focused on Jesus? Do we see Jesus only as we want to see him? Or do we see him in everyone.

At the family “Create our own Eucharist” a little over a week ago; we discussed this parable over dinner. We looked at how each of us was involved in reaching out in our workplace or at school, in church, and on our own. We had a big list (no we were not keeping score) – but it took us several minutes to recount them all. We do a lot here at St. Stephen’s:

- Jim’s closet – clothing for the poor
- Food for the poor
- Our harvest ingathering for St. Julie’s pantry today
- School supplies for SMUM
- Sudanese Youth Opportunity scholarships
- Second harvest food sorting

Then I asked everyone another question and I’ll ask you – who here feels they need to do more? A lot of hands went up on Saturday. Now you have to ask the question – why?

- Is it the Christ in you just aching to reach out to the Christ in others?
- Or is it a social pressure: I need to look good?
- Or is it out of guilt and fear that you’ll end up in eternal hell?

These are important questions – sheep and goat-type questions. Heart questions. And we all want to be sheep.

The question then is how do we become a sheep? The answer: we need to know Jesus – not just who he was as a person – a teacher, healer, or miracle worker. We also need to know him as King. We need to know him as Lord. We need to know him as our Shepherd. Sheep know the voice of their shepherd. They know it because they spend almost every moment of their lives in his presence. The shepherd provides:

- everything they need
- safe places to rest
- water to drink
- the right path to follow
- protection from harm
- food

It is in those moments in our life when Jesus is our provider, our protector, our comforter when He is as close as anyone can be. We feel his love for us despite our sinfulness, our humanness. He loves us just as we are. When we can accept that, we accept Him. And the result? It turns our life around. We then can go out and love people just the way they are without any expectation of change; without any expectation of gratitude or reciprocity. And without keeping score.

We are at the end of our church year. This story of final judgment concludes the year and this section of gospel readings from Matthew. All year long we have been prepared to move

forward into our lives as disciples of the King. We are ready to listen for our Shepherd to guide the way. You all know the custom of making New Year's resolutions? What will be your spiritual resolutions for next year? Will it be to look for Jesus in new places and people? Will it be to participate in a Bible study to get to know your Lord better? Will it be to move into a new ministry to reach out to others? My prayer for you for the New Year is that you will hear the voice of your Shepherd and your King in many new and inspiring ways.
God Bless. *Amen.*