

Christ the King Sunday A November 22 2020

Matthew 25:31-46

St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth

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Brothers and Sisters, the unlimited and powerful grace, peace, mercy, and love of God be yours in the name of the Father, Jesus, and Holy Spirit. Amen. Let's pray:

Dear Saints; Beloved of God; Beautiful People, the first thing I want to say is don't worry about whether you're a sheep or a goat. You are saved by grace through faith, not by whether you "baa" or "bleat". Rather, I want you to see that our Lord is indeed Lord of *all* things, both good and evil, and the crucial difference between faith - trusting God and what *he* knows, over and against what we think is good or bad - reaching for the forbidden fruit.

The truth is, we are often clueless - "Um, Lord, when was it that we did what?" "Hey, Lord, when was it that we didn't do what?" Sheep, goats, the Son of Man, the devil, angels, eternity. The divine comedy rolls on.

The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, or the Great Judgement, is where Jesus ties together all of his earlier teachings about God's kingdom. Throughout his ministry, Jesus presents God's saving action using five characteristics. God's kingdom is: *universal*, not limited; *mysterious*, not recognisable; *actual*, not virtual or yet to come; met with *hostility* as well as welcome; and calls for a *response of faith* rather than works. I'll address each in turn.

Universal

In this parable, "All the nations" are gathered before Jesus on his throne of glory. Not one skerrick of creation, Jew or Gentile, good, bad, or indifferent, is left out of the kingdom. Jesus has literally drawn *all* to himself. And Paul's entire argument in the theological part of his letter to the Romans closes with, "*all* Israel will be saved" [11:26,27].

What this means is that even evil is given a place in the final scheme of things. It's true that Jesus' parables are full of images of separation: the man without the wedding garment; the foolish bridesmaids; the lazy servant, and are cast into the outer darkness. But in the Great Judgement, Jesus stipulates that he "will separate people one from another *as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.*" Do you get what that means? Jesus is the Good Shepherd, and the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. And... he lays down his life for the goats as well, because on the cross, Jesus draws *all* to himself. It's not that the sheep are his and the goats aren't. The sheep are *his* sheep and the goats are *his* goats. Any separation can only happen within his shepherding (see Genesis 30:32 and especially Exodus 12:5).

Hence, Jesus' *drawing of all to himself*, is the ultimate gravitational force in the universe; nothing, not even evil, is exempted from it. Hell has no choice but to be within the power of the final party, even though it turns its nose up at it. Hell doesn't lie outside the festivities; it's impounded within them. Evil is hidden, to borrow an image, in the spear wound in Christ's side to keep it from spoiling the party; but it is no less a part of Jesus' all-encompassing shepherding of *his* flock.

Mystery

The kingdom of God is like an iceberg; much of which lies beneath the water out of sight. The tip of the iceberg are those glimpses of heaven we are intermittently permitted. At the *Parousia*, or Second Coming of Christ, the iceberg is thrust fully upward and in a never-to-be-hidden-again-spectacular, beyond comparison, Christ is revealed in all his brilliant glory. The Son of man has come in all his glory and everything is out in the open. All the waiting and wondering about the mystery of faith is over and everyone, whether faithful or not, knows it. Time has run out, the kingdom will never again be hidden, and all things are finally understood. Jesus has made all things new.

Actuality

God's kingdom has been really present throughout the course of history. The kingdom can't be more present than it has been all along and this parable simply reveals it as it has always been – triumphant; victorious. The kingdom prepared by God from the foundation of the world; the whole mysterious inheritance that has always been accessible by faith, is now a dazzling, identifiable, and touchable beauty for you, his children. Jesus has had a party pumping from the first day in Genesis and now at the Wedding Feast of the Lamb, he raises his glass to the reality that it will never end.

Hostility and Response

For the fulfilment of this parable to be understood, these must be taken together. Hostility toward the kingdom of God is only ever portrayed by Jesus as *unfaith*. On the other hand, the response called for by the kingdom is simply, *faith*. This is critical in avoiding the interpretation of Scripture as nothing more than moralistic explanations.

It's too easy to turn the cursed goats at the King's left hand into bad people loaded down with sins of neglect, and the blessed sheep at his right hand into do-gooders. That simply doesn't stand up to the rigour of Jesus' teachings. Jesus regularly avoids portraying badness as an obstacle to his kingdom, just as he masterfully steers us clear of believing goodness is one of its entrance requirements. Again, I offer the prodigal and I add, the publican ([tax collector] Luke 18:9-14), as examples of "bad" people who are acceptable by faith rather than works. In fact, Jesus shows good and evil existing side-by-side within the kingdom in the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds (Matthew 13:24-30). He lets the two grow together until the harvest. Sure, Jesus says there'll be a separation at the Great Judgement, but, there're two important things to take note of here.

First, as I said earlier, Jesus is the Shepherd of both the sheep and the goats. Jesus doesn't separate the two because he's unable to put up with evil; it's something Jesus does himself in the interests of his own goodness. As King, Jesus establishes the best possible government of all the subjects of his kingship. Jesus doesn't have a problem with evil; rather, on the cross he absorbs all of the evil of the world into himself: "For our sake he [God] made him [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin" (2 Corinthians 5:21a).

So, whatever hell is, it can't be where God isn't. Now I know I've described it that way many times myself, but with further study and deeper reflection, I've come to realise that Jesus, in his creating Word, is immediately present to it as well and, he is Lord of it too: "He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him" (Mark 1:27). Jesus is the Life; Jesus is the Shepherd even of the goats he divides from his sheep. As tricky as this parable is, I caution against suggesting that Jesus swaps his velvet gloves of grace for a pair of brass knuckles. Nor should we turn the Good Shepherd into the bad wolf.

Second, faith is fundamental to understanding the separation narrative. Throughout Jesus' parables, he spends a lot of time teaching his listeners that goodness or badness has nothing to do with salvation. The gift of grace is a gift of acceptance already granted – forgiveness is an unassailable force granted to everyone – it's a free gift that requires only a response of trust to enjoy. The prodigal doesn't clean up his life; he trusts in his father's acceptance (Luke 15:11-32). The eleventh-hour labourers don't earn their pay by working twelve times harder; they merely accept the vineyard owner's invitation (Matthew 20:1-16). And the publican [tax collector] isn't sent home justified because he promises to lead a better life [works]; he confesses his death [sin] and trusts in the God who can raise the dead (Luke 18:9-14).

So, Jesus deals with hostility not so much by banishing but providing for it. Jesus brings unfaith into the sphere of the gracious indulgence of God's forgiveness by dying in order to raise the dead. As the master of the house in the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds (Matthew 13:24-30) does the least damaging thing he can think of with the weeds, so the King in this parable does the least damaging thing he can think of with the cursed. In effect, Jesus says, "If you want to sulk, go outside. We're having a party in here." [My thinking here is based on Revelation 1:18 where Jesus says, "I have the keys of Death and of Hades", implying that Jesus is able to lock and unlock the gates of Hades and has power over life and death].

What Jesus shows in this parable is that ultimately, nobody *knows* anything. Knowledge isn't the basis of anyone's salvation or condemnation. The sheep really don't have any more clue than the goats, when it comes to grace. Salvation comes only by relationship with Jesus – a relationship that from his perspective is already an accomplished eternal reality that needs only to be accepted by faith. As Luther said, "No man can know or feel he is saved; he can only believe it."

Therefore, all our theological baggage about who's in or who's out; faith that seems to fade; all the tightrope walking over the fate of suicides; all the doctrinal gymnastics promoted to give the unbaptised a break or show how invincibly ignorant unbelievers are, and all the baaing and bleating about sheep and goats – all of it is idle speculation, mischievous, and unwarranted. The truth is, we simply don't know; we must be silent where Scripture is silent, and just trust the forgiveness that Jesus has already showered on us from the cross. And we don't even have to know if we've succeeded in doing that – remember, "Um, Lord, when was it that we did what?" [Today's parable], because Jesus draws *all* of creation to himself. He is the Love that will not let us go. He can sort it all out, and he will. Trust Jesus. There's nothing more we can do. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.