

Sunday November 26th, 2017
Christ the King

PRAYER: Great shepherd of the sheep, you have given us Christ who shepherds the church. He is the host when the table is spread. We praise your name for all the goodness you give us, the mercy that, like oil, anoints all of our lives. As we dwell secure in the sanctuary of your salvation, open to us the truth of your word. Lead us to serve you more faithfully as in Christ you have called us to do your will. Amen.

STEWARDSHIP: May God's will be done as the least of his children are led to behold the hope of the gospel. May God take our lives and consecrate them to obeying what Christ commands. As we offer our gifts, may God use them as a means to bring hope to those who hunger and thirst after righteousness. May the Holy Spirit take our time and fill it with a sense God's ever abiding presence that others may learn of his redeeming grace. Let us present now our gifts.

PASTORAL PRAYER: Shepherd God of Israel, who sent Jesus to be the shepherd of the church, we thank you for his love that guides and nurtures your people. He cradles us in his arms and brings us back to the fold for safety. He leads us to pastures where quiet streams flow. In the waters of baptism, we are confirmed as members of his fold. In the breaking of bread, we are strengthened; the cup passed among us is the sign of new life. The old find consolation; the young are granted visions.

We thank you that we are numbered as the flock of Jesus the Good Shepherd. He names us as he calls us to walk with him. He leads us on the journey our life will take as his followers; he teaches us what it means to obey. By his judgment we will know when we have strayed; by his mercy we will be saved from foolish ways.

By your mercy, teach us the meaning of true righteousness. Help us to know what it means to serve your people in need. Where there is hunger, let us be the ones to offer bread. When others thirst, let us offer the cup of cold water in Christ's name. Through us may the stranger find a place to stay, and the tattered and the naked clothed. May our ministry serve as keys to your pasture, unlocking the gates so that your people enter the sheepfold. There may all find shelter and grow in faith and obedience as followers of Christ who fulfilled all your will.

BENEDICTION: "The spirit that God gave us is one to inspire strength, love and self-discipline. Don't ever be ashamed of your testimony to our Lord, give of yourself and love the world for Christ's sake." (2 Timothy 1:7, 8)

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Matthew 25:31-46

“What Does Jesus Want from Me?”

I ran across a story about a dear sweet older man whose beloved dog died. The beloved animal was all the family he had, so he desired to give his dog a proper farewell with a funeral. Unfortunately, his own pastor was away on holiday, so he decided to approach the local Baptist minister for assistance with the conducting the funeral of his dog. Upon arriving at the minister’s office, the man proceeded to explain that he wanted to have a funeral for his beloved pet.

Although the minister was sympathetic, and could see the emotional pain the man was under, he respectfully had to decline as he did not do funerals for pets. The man, although disappointed, said he understood, and was about to leave and asked, “I guess I’ll talk to the United Church minister, do you think \$200 is enough to give the minister for helping me bury my dog?” Without missing a beat, the Baptist pastor replied, “Now hold on a minute, you didn’t tell me your dog was a Baptist.”

I do love jokes and stories about dogs, but I must admit that I am really a cat person. Don’t get me wrong, I love dogs too, but if I had to choose, I would probably choose a cat, unless it was a Victorian bulldog. In fact, we had to have our beloved cat Marble put down recently, and I still miss him. Especially those 3 AM wake up calls. Actually, do you know why dogs and cats are so different?

A dog looks at you with those big brown eyes, cocks its head to one side and says to itself, “You love me, you feed me, you care for me, you take me for walks...you must be God”. A cat looks at you with those piercing green eyes and thinks to itself “you love me, you feed me, you care for me, you pet me...I must be God”. Are you a cat person? Are you a dog person?

People are different from one another, aren’t we? Some of us are morning people, and some are night hawks. Some people are optimists, and some are pessimists. Some people are type “A” personalities, and some are the rest. Some people love to shop at Walmart, and some love to make their way to the Bay. There are people who have stock brokers, and there are people who are perfectly capable to going broke on their own.

What kind of person are you? How do you describe yourself? Before us today is a very difficult parable; maybe the most challenging parable of all. At the heart of the parable is a description of how Jesus differentiates people. Particularly, how Jesus will separate people, or sift us like wheat, when he returns to the earth. This is often referred to as the Second Coming. Simply put, Jesus is described as dividing us into sheep and goats.

Obviously, the idea that we are sheep and goats is allegorical in nature. His original audience was quite familiar with sheep and goats. In Jesus’ day the sheep were more valuable than goats, primarily because sheep had more uses. The keeping of goats and sheep together was quite a common practice. It was a beneficial practice because sheep ate exclusively grass while goats would indulge in weeds as well as grass.

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This made for good pasture management. Also, goats sometimes acted as a deterrent against predators, especially Billy goats with their horns. Both groups of animals had their challenges in their care. Sheep are notoriously stupid and easily misled. On the other hand, shepherds or herdsmen, would often separate out the goats from the larger herd, in the evening, to get them inside a shelter, because they did not handle the cold as well as sheep did, with their wool coats.

Interesting that Jesus suggests in the parable, that the goats will be led away to a “warm place”, just as shepherds actually did. Jesus is clearly painting a picture to represent a deeper truth. The problem is; what exactly is that deeper truth? Some parts of the parable are pretty clear. It is obvious that Jesus is concerned about the “least of these”. Specifically, how we have treated them. Have we fed them, clothed them, visited them, welcomed them, and cared for them when they were sick.

Straight forward enough, or is it? Who are these “least of these”? Over centuries of interpretation, three primary interpretations of the “least of these” have persisted. First, some old time dispensational theologians, believed that Jesus was concerned with how we Gentiles cared for Jewish people. Have we cared for God’s chosen people? Some preachers have even used this text as a way of addressing anti-Semitism.

Still others draw on a different tactic. They see the “least of these” as Jesus representatives, his disciples. In other words, people will be judged on how they have cared for those who serve Christ as his preachers and missionaries. This idea comes primarily from the part about being in prison. In other words, being arrested and mistreated for the gospel.

Prison was a bit different in Jesus’ day. People were often locked away awaiting trial. There was no such thing as posting bail. It was up to the person’s family, or friends, to actually bring food and other necessities to care for them, as the prison did not provide these resources. Without someone to provide for you, you might starve waiting for trial. So, were Jesus’ representative being cared for by those among whom they served?

Then finally, there is the most popular explanation, that the “least of these” simply means anyone who is down and out. In other words, folks in which life has just simply beat them down. Used this way, often preachers will use this interpretation to seek to guilt people into doing more for the care of the poor. They urge their parishioners to avoid being judged as goats. So, which interpretation is it? Maybe it is all three? I wonder; does it really matter?

What exactly is Jesus getting at in this parable? The troubling part of this parable, at least as I see it, is that it would appear Jesus is suggesting that our salvation, our eternal reward, is based on our works. Hold on a minute! That is so contrary to the Gospel message of being saved by grace, something isn’t right. The truth of the gospel is that I can visit millions, feed billions, spend all my time at jails, but that doesn’t save me. I will always insist that we are saved by grace. That was what Paul stressed in his letters, and that was what was at the heart of the reformation.

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If you want a wonderful explanation of this check out Hebrews chapter 11. So, how then do we reconcile what Jesus is saying in this parable, with the idea that works cannot save us? Just like last week we asked the question. What is Jesus main point in this parable?

It is a bit tricky maybe to discern at first, but as soon as I point it out to you, it may refocus this parable for you. Did you notice during this sorting process, when the sheep are set to one side, and the goats were placed over to the other side, both groups had the same question? Confronted with whether or not they fed the hungry, clothed the naked, cared for the sick, welcomed the stranger or visit the jailed, both groups asked a very profound question. The question on which this parable hangs.

“When?” When Lord did we or did we not feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the sick, or visit those in prison? Did you notice that? Both the sheep and the goats are oblivious. The sheep are unaware of the good things they had done, and the goats are unaware of their failures to care for the “least of these”. Don’t you find that odd? You would think I would remember when I helped someone, or when I failed to act.

Well maybe not. Are you familiar with one of Aesop’s tales? A scorpion and a frog meet on the bank of a stream and the scorpion asks the frog to carry him across on its back. The frog asks, "How do I know you won't sting me?" The scorpion says, "Because if I do, I will die too." The frog is satisfied, and they set out, but in midstream, the scorpion stings the frog. The frog feels the onset of paralysis and starts to sink, knowing they both will drown, but has just enough time to gasp "Why?" Replies the scorpion: "It's my nature..."

Here’s a fun fact. A sheep is not a goat, and a goat is not a sheep. There are different. They are distinct in their nature and characteristics. Could it be that Jesus is talking about something more fundamental than my works of charity? I think Jesus is very concerned about my nature. Specifically, my heart. All of us do things without thinking. Somethings in this life, we have done so often it is what? Second nature to us.

Jesus is indicating that when we identify with him, and follow him, we are fundamentally changed. Our acts of kindness, and charity, become expressions of our hearts, our very natures. Just as a sheep or a goat cannot help being what it is, as Christ’s people, we cannot help responding to the “least of these” as Jesus wishes us to. Earlier I asked if you were a cat person or a dog person; are you a Christ person. Is Jesus’ nature found in us? Have we adopted the same approach to our neighbours as Jesus has?

Have you ever had an experience, where someone comes to you and thanks you for something you did to help them out, and you think to yourself, “when did I do that”? I’m glad I did, but I cannot for the life of me remember doing that. I think that is because you acted as the incarnated Christ to someone else. His presence and nature were operating out of, and through you. You did it from the heart, not from your mind.

And the more this happens, the more we become like Jesus. The more we become sheep, and light, and salt etc.

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However, I would be remiss if I did not point out the danger inherent here. I came across a funny story about a man who applied for a job at a local zoo. The head zookeeper explained that the only job they had at the moment was to dress up like a gorilla and act like one for the crowds that came through. The zoo's gorilla had recently died and they had yet to procure a new one. The pay was pretty good, so the man took the job.

It was a cushy job, and the man soon loved getting into character, swinging around the gym equipment placed for the gorilla. Unfortunately, in his exuberance one day he swung too hard on the rope swing, and when he let go he sailed over the wall and landed right in front of a ferocious lion. The man panicked and began to yell for help. Suddenly, the lion spoke up and said, "Be quiet, you'll get us both fired."

The point is, you cannot falsify your nature. You cannot pretend to be something you are not. Your true nature will ultimately be revealed. That is what this parable is saying. You can pretend to represent Jesus, but the heart doesn't lie. This is a common theme in the gospels, and especially in Matthew. Earlier in Matthew 7, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus addresses the danger of simply pretending to be his followers.

He says, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day (same day as the parable) many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?' Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; go away from me, you evil-doers.'" (vs. 21-23)

Let's get this straight. The issue before us is not to bully people into doing more for Jesus, whoever the "least of these" may be. In other words, it is abusive to use this passage to make people feel guilty they didn't give more or do more. After all, we are coming into the season of the year where every charity on the planet tries to make us feel guilty. Jesus is not primarily concerned here about what you do; that may surprise you.

Jesus cares not about what you do, but who and whose you are. Has Christ changed your nature; influenced your heart. Just as the scorpion could not help what he is, can you react to life in a way that shows you are a follower of Jesus. Or at the very least his character is influencing you in ways you cannot even begin to recognize. Such is the story from Reader's Digest of a doctor in Florida who wrote...

As I walked through the parking lot, all I could think about was the dire diagnosis I had handed my patient Jimmy: pancreatic cancer. Just then, I noticed an elderly gentleman handing tools to someone working under his stalled car. That someone was Jimmy. "Jimmy, what are you doing?" I yelled out. Jimmy dusted off his pants. "My cancer didn't tell me not to help others, Doc," he said, before waving at the old man to start the car. The engine roared to life. The old man thanked Jimmy and drove off. Then Jimmy got into his car and took off as well. *Mohammed Basha, Gainesville, Florida*

Maybe asking Jesus the question of when did we clothe the naked and feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, care for the sick and visit those in jail is the wrong question.

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The better question is why did I feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the sick, welcome the stranger, and visit the jailed. What motivated me to such a kindness? I am the first to admit that I have dropped the ball on occasion in caring for others, as I am sure we all have, but of primary importance I think, is that as we grow closer to God in Christ, more of his nature rubs off on us.

So, the answer to why we did a good thing for someone else, comes not out of obligation or guilt, but out of a heart changed by grace. As our hearts change, kindness and love will flow out of us in such abundance, we cannot possibly remember every act of charity and mercy. What does Jesus want from us? Simply put, he wants our hearts to be like his, because he knows it is the only way to an abundant life.