

Sunday: Last Sunday of the Church Year

Date: November 22, 2020

Text: Matthew 25:31-46

Title:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Please pray with me.

Today marks the end of the church year. It is a sort of New Year's Eve for our in the Christian community. As our liturgical calendar moves from Advent, to Christmas, Epiphany and Lent, Easter and Pentecost, we progress from the promise of the coming Messiah to his birth, revealing, life, death, resurrection, ascension and the creation of His church at Pentecost. Over the summer and fall we trace the growth of the church, ultimately looking to the return of our Lord. This Last Sunday of the church year is the time when we look at what will happen at the end of time as we know it, and look forward to the new kingdom in which we will see Jesus face to face.

The last few weeks we have explored Jesus parables relating to His return. The teachings of Jesus reflect that the time of his return is unknown to all people. In addition, we are called to remain faithful and alert, even though his return seems to be delayed beyond our thoughts and desires.

This final Sunday of the church calendar picks up the progression of the last month and draws us to the day of judgement. Generally, we jump to Revelation for images of the day of judgement. However, Jesus gives us a look at that day in his teaching to the disciples on the Mount of Olives. The gospel reading for today is the last part of Jesus fifth discourse in Matthew's gospel. Wrapping up his eschatological teachings Jesus paints the picture of the throne of heaven where he will judge the living and the dead, as we confess in our creeds.

Jesus uses the imagery of sheep and goats as he sits on the throne of heaven. Crowned as the Lord over all creation, he calls all the nations before his judgement seat. Millions, Billions of people represented by the crowd gathered before the Son of God, to whom all authority has been given. Now is the time foretold by Jesus and the prophets. The delayed bridegroom has arrived, the trumpet has sounded, the master has returned and called his servants to give account.

Thoughts of the final judgment cause most people to be apprehensive to say the least. Many are downright terrified of standing before the perfect and just God. As humans we tend to worry about things that we cannot control. We seek assurance that we will be counted with the righteous. This feeling of inadequacy in preparation for the final judgment has led to some interesting interpretations of the Scriptures and of our text for today.

As the nations come before the throne of Christ, we encounter the Lamb who was slain seated, having been crowned in glory. Visions of his coronation arise in our minds as we are drawn to Revelation 1, 4, and 20. The risen and ascended Lord Jesus speaks to John and to us saying, in chapter 1

When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, “Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades” (Revelation 1:17-18).

And of the final judgement John writes in chapter 20,

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them, and I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and the books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books according to what they had done (Revelation 20:11-12).

As Jesus teaches his disciples, he draws the image of Revelation for them. The nations gathered for judgment, separated based upon their names being written or omitted from the book of life. The sheep reflect the redeemed whose names appear in the book of life, while the goats are the ones condemned for their rejection of the saving grace of the Messiah.

Jesus does not paint this picture to frighten people, but to give them comfort that he is truly ruler over all creation and he will come again to bring his faithful people to be with him in paradise. He makes it very clear that there is a final judgment and that his chosen followers will be numbered with the sheep.

Our fallen human nature does not always see the message of hope and peace intended by Jesus for his sheep. The mindset of humans, especially in our culture, is to find comfort not in the promises of Jesus, but in our finding the one thing that makes our salvation assured. Matthew 25 31-46 has lent itself to this type of

interpretation over the years, centuries, and even millenniums. As Jesus welcomes the sheep into his kingdom he says,

Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.

In response, the sheep will ask,

Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?

And Jesus replies,

Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.

In condemning the goats, he will judge them saying,

Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. . . . Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.

I have heard many a pastor and teacher apply this text to Christians in a sense that you must feed the poor, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned. The Social Justice Warriors of our day point to this as one of their proof texts for caring for the poor and underprivileged. Perhaps you have been confronted with this interpretation and application in our community and even in our Lutheran Churches. I know I have. While it is absolutely true that we need to care for all our neighbors, these words of Jesus are not marching orders for social ministry.

To hear Jesus' words to caring for His brothers as a steppingstone to salvation runs contrary to our understanding of Christ and the salvation he won for all mankind on the cross of Calvary. Jesus' death and resurrection is all that is needed for salvation. Works do not earn us a place at the wedding feast of the Lamb in the eternal kingdom. Instead they are the natural outgrowth of the free gift of grace and the faith created in us by the power of the Holy Spirit.

To properly understand this passage, we need to understand who Jesus is referring to when he says “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.”

So who are these “brothers” Jesus speaks of? In Matthew 12, Jesus is teaching in a house, most likely in Capernaum, when his Mother and brothers come looking for him. Matthew details the event,

<sup>46</sup> While he was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him. <sup>48</sup> But he replied to the man who told him, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” <sup>49</sup> And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! <sup>50</sup> For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.” (Matthew 12:46-50)

Jesus identifies the disciples as his family, his mother and his brothers. While all Christians are Jesus’ adopted brothers and sisters, and mother, he singles out his disciples here and in Matthew 19 when speaking of the time when Jesus will judge the world saying,

Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. (Matthew 19:28)

The disciples of Jesus will be seated with him at the judgment. They reflect the foundation of the church as the message of the Gospel was proclaimed through them to the sin sick people of the world. These messengers of Christ were given the commission to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20a).

This mantle of preaching and teaching was passed on to missionaries, preachers, pastors and teachers through the ages. Jesus’ brothers are those went forth to proclaim the gospel to human ears, baptize sinful hearts, announce forgiveness of sins to repentant sinners, and share the body and blood of Christ with believers. In recognition of the gifts brought to broken humanity, Jesus commends the sheep for supporting and loving the shepherds sent to them.

The original disciples, including Matthias and Paul, all suffered the very maladies Jesus speaks of in his discourse on the judgment of man. Acts, the letters

of Paul, James and John reflect the difficulties encountered by the early church. All of the disciples suffered at the hands of men who rejected the gospel. Most suffered horrible deaths. This practice continued as mankind resisted the proclamation of the saving gospel of Christ. Periods of persecution and torture have arisen throughout time and continue still today. While we have been spared the ravages of physical abuse for the most part, pastors, teachers, missionaries and evangelists still feel many of the effects of a culture opposed to God and the precious gift of salvation poured out on the world. In caring for the messengers of the gospel, the sheep unknowingly feed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, visited the sick, and came to the prisoner. In accepting and caring for Jesus' brothers, we are blessed by the gospel proclaimed and shared in our presence.

The goats in rejecting these messengers are guilty of rejecting Jesus,

<sup>40</sup>“Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. <sup>41</sup>The one who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and the one who receives a righteous person because he is a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward. <sup>42</sup>And whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward.” (Matthew 10:40-42)

Fellow sheep, as we support all who bring the gospel to us, we receive Jesus, and receive the gift of grace from the Father. We do not count our caring and support of those who proclaim the gospel to us as a work of merit toward our salvation, but as a natural outgrowth of the love poured out on us as children chosen by God to be a part of his kingdom.

We are saved by faith, not by works. We are not assured of our salvation by our social justice efforts, but by the grace of God in the sacrifice of Christ for us. We must resist the efforts to convert Jesus' words of hope in our gospel today into one more item to put on the checklist we must complete to be numbered with the righteous. You are already there. You are forgiven. You are loved by God. You are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand.

May the love of our God, shown to us in Christ and the faith he has given us through the proclamation of his word, lead us to love Jesus' brothers by hearing the

gospel proclaimed, growing in faith, sharing the hope that we have and loving our neighbors as ourselves.

Dear father help us all to support, encourage, pray for, listen to, and love even the broken humans called to serve up the gospel for our benefit and the salvation of the whole world.

Amen