

So this week we come to the end of the year. That's right, the end of the Church year, not the end of the secular year. Today we are closing the circle. From Jesus the innocent baby, to Jesus as judge, as King. Our own nave is symbolic of the transition, we enter to see the baptismal font and come down this aisle, to the promise of everlasting life.

The new church year starts next Sunday. A little math here. We take the year, 2014, divide by three, get a remainder of 1 and call it year B. Our Gospel readings move from Matthew to Mark. The Daily Office is ready to go to year two, 2014 being an even year. Confusing isn't it? There will be a quiz next week.

Today's gospel contains some tough words. Words we don't like to hear, to think about. Images of eternal fire and judgment. We usually see Jesus as the benevolent one, always forgiving, but today, Christ the King day, Jesus is portrayed as the ultimate judge. He gathers the nations and pronounces judgment, righteous on one side, cursed on the other.

We don't like to think about judgment day, end time. We would rather go on our merry way, going to church Sunday morning. An occasional Sunday school class. Maybe a Wednesday or Thursday service.. Aren't we practicing our faith well?

The familiar theme in Matthew is good versus bad. Good wheat, bad wheat. Good seed, bad seed. Fertile soil, rocky soil. Some bridesmaids were ready when the bridegroom came, some let their lamps burn out. Today Matthew separates us into sheep and goats. Did we ever want to be either?

I've never lived around goats or sheep. My grandfather had cows. Our oldest daughter has some city chickens. But I have experienced both on pilgrimages to Ireland and Iona. The sheep were a little free range I guess and the herds were mixed together. They were identified by the color of spray paint on the coat. Right shoulder green, left shoulder red. Right rump blue, left red etc. We also learned while walking to do the sheep dip shuffle if you know what I mean.

Now sheep and goats were often grazed together by the shepherd. But at night, at the end of the day, the goats and the sheep were parted. The sheep slept with the sheep, the goats with the goats. The goats, with their thin coat, needed a sheltered place to bed down. The sheep's superior coat kept them warm.

Sheep equal goodness. That's easy to see. They're cute, cuddly, mostly white. They're coat is prized. Goats on the other hand are bad. Scruffy. An ugly black coat. Disgusting feeding habits. Good cheese though. Jesus says sheep to the right, goats to the left. You win, you lose. You get eternal fire, you get the kingdom.

OK, we're going to split into sheep and goats, a little role play. Everybody on the left...you're goats. On the right, you are sheep. That's my left. You guys thought you were sheep, right? And you on this side. You were a little nervous about the goat thing weren't you? Are you surprised at your designation? We'll pause here if anyone wants to change seats.

You see, you weren't sure how you would be labeled, how you would be judged were you? Will we be shocked or sure on judgment day?

Notice how the Gospel lesson goes. To the group on the right, the sheep, Jesus says "when I was hungry, you fed me, when I was naked you clothed me, when I was in prison you visited me, when I was a stranger you took me in. And they said, when Lord, when did we see you?"

To the goats, the group on the left, Jesus says I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat. When I was naked you did not clothe me, When I was in prison you did not visit me. When I was a stranger you gave me no home. And they replied, when Lord, when did we see you?

Notice the similarities? Both groups expressed disbelief. When, when, Lord? We didn't see you.

But the goats ignored the least, while the sheep nurtured them. This is how we will be judged. Not by our church attendance, not by consciously doing good deeds, checking them off a list like merit badges. OK, I fed a homeless person, now if I only knew someone in prison.

I'll tell you a story. A number of years ago I worked in the heart of downtown Atlanta. Outside my building a man would sit in a wheel chair from mid morning until late afternoon. His gnarled body was contorted in the chair, his chest and arms went one way, his legs and torso another. My guess is that he had cerebral palsy. His name was Larry. He may still be there, I don't know.

He was something of an urban legend. It was said on the street that Larry's family dropped him off each day in a Lincoln to beg for money. Or so the story went. My friend Ellen gave Larry a coat one winter when it was really cold. It was a woman's parka, but it was warm. Ellen had the courage and faith to engage Larry, to risk a relationship with him, even for only a moment. She clothed the naked, she looked into his eyes.

How many times in my goatness did I walk by Larry. Every once in a while I would put some change or a dollar in his cup. He tried to say thank you, but it was difficult for him to form the words. I never thought about Jesus. Surely Larry was among the least. Most days I walked by, avoiding his outstretched hand holding a dirty cup. Was it the cup of Christ?

The two great commandments are "love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind. And the second is love your neighbor as yourself." Love God, love neighbor. Love God, love neighbor. Love neighbor, love God. Love neighbor, Love God. LOVE.

Where does one start and the other stop? Where is the transition? Which comes first? Neither. When it is truly in our hearts, it is a seamless transition.

I John ch 4 tells us, “If a man says I love God while hating his brother he is a liar. If he does not love the brother whom he has seen, it cannot be that he loves God whom he has not seen. And indeed this command comes to us from Christ himself; that he who loves God must also love his brother. “

The bottom line is this. If we can't love our neighbor, we can't love God. It is a condition of mutuality. You can't have one without the other. Our selfless love of our neighbor allows us to truly know and love God. Our love of God enables us to reach out to all our brothers and sisters. We internalize Jesus. Our heart and His heart, molded together as one.

Our gospel lesson tells us that judgment will come based on our hearts. How do we live our everyday lives? How do we love without thinking? How is our faith part of our being?

So judgment will come, not in a cataclysmic event, but it will surely come. You see, Jesus knows. He knows what we're up to and what we're not. He won't send us a text, but he knows. He won't email us, but he knows. He's not going to post on Facebook or Twitter or call us on our cell phone, but he knows.

And we will be judged by what we do in the in between time.....between baptism and death. The goats went to the left not because of their persecution of the least, but because they did nothing. They may have felt compassion, but they did nothing. They did not get down from their ox cart, they did not share the food from their table, they did not take the shirt from their back. They did not hold the hand of the leper. They did not reach out to Jesus.

The sheep lined up on the right because the love God, love neighbor model was part of their soul. They trusted the Jesus in their heart and reached out to the Jesus in the needy. They gave their love and God continually filled them with grace and love to overflowing, so they could share it with others. There will be accountability for our actions and inaction's. We are judged by the model of Christ.

Yet the really good news is that the one who sits in judgment, the King, is also the shepherd who loves us.. Jesus understands failure. He understands the poor, the ones in prison, the prostitute in the streets. His ministry was centered not on the wealthy, not with the privileged, but with the lost. Jesus lifts them up and honors them. The Larry's invite and challenge us to see the world through Jesus eyes, the eyes of the sacrificial lamb. And when we look in His eyes, He will know. He will know what is in our heart and in our actions. He knows what we're up to and who we are.

Will you live your faith in the image of Christ? Will you? As a sheep have confidence in the day of judgment. For when judgment comes it will be an affirmation of our faith and love. Rejoice in the glow of the love of God, for the Good Shepherd awaits. AMEN.