

Church of the Divine Love

Sermon Sunday November 22, 2020

Ezekiel 34: 11-16, 20-24; Psalm 95: 1-7a; Ephesians 1: 15-23; Matthew 25: 31-46

Beloved of God, Grace and peace to you from Jesus, our Good Shepherd.

This is Christ the King Sunday, and also the Sunday before Thanksgiving. I want to wish all of you happy thanksgiving, even it's a special thanksgiving this year, but anyway it's a thanksgiving. We each have so much to be thankful for. And as followers of Jesus we need to say thank God, and we also need to express our thankfulness through our actions.

Over the past few weeks, we have been looking at a series of parables about the Second Coming of Christ. Each of the parables that we have looked at depict One of great importance, a Bride Groom, or a Master, who is away and will return at an unexpected hour. In Jesus' parable today, depicting what is probably the most famous final judgment scenes of all time, God is the absolute ruler. All the nations are gathered before the throne of God, where God sits surrounded by angels, separating the people as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. This is the last in a series of parables Jesus has been telling about what the kingdom of God is like. It's unlike the past two parables we've heard, however, both of which focused on preparing for the kingdom of God. One featured a bridesmaid anticipating the Bridegroom arriving, and last week was about the master who doled out his fortune to be handled by his servants before leaving town and coming back at an undetermined time. Both of those parables primarily ask the question, "When will the kingdom come?" and invite us to consider what how we are to live while we are waiting.

Today's parable no one is waiting for the kingdom anymore: it has arrived! So, if God's kingdom has already come, and Jesus is the King, why doesn't he get busy doing kingly things, like bringing some order to the chaos that surrounds us? Why is he hanging on a cross instead of in the capitol, ripping up unjust laws and enacting some good ones? Why isn't he on Wall Street, throwing around a few tables? If Jesus is lord of all, why is there still corruption and sickness and sadness and death? Isn't the king supposed to change all the bad stuff into good stuff for us?

When Jesus talked about the kingdom of God, he said that in it, those who were poor were blessed, and those who were weeping would find laughter. In Jesus' kingdom, the lame could walk, the blind could see, and the guilty were forgiven. In Jesus' kingdom, people of different religions drank from the same well, and no one was excluded from table fellowship. In Jesus' kingdom, the king did not wait for his wayward subjects to return home, but instead, he went out seeking any who were lost and alone. In Jesus' kingdom, the primary rule was the law of love.

So, if Jesus was so accessible to those around him in his life, why, in the parable Jesus tells, does no one seem to remember that they've encountered the King before? Isn't it interesting that neither the righteous nor the unrighteous have any idea where or when they've seen King Jesus before the judgment? "When did we see you?" they ask. And the King tells both the sheep and the goats, "I'm exactly where I've always been! Even since the beginning I've been aligned with the people you consider 'the least of these.' If you are looking for me, look where you've always seen me to be among the poor, the sick, the hungry, the imprisoned, the neglected. Any time you take care your neighbors in need, you are face to face with me."

On this Christ the King Sunday, I invite us to let go of figuring out who we think are the sheep or the goats, on whether we (or anyone else) sit on God's right or left hand. Instead let's look straight into the face and heart and hands of our King Jesus—the king who calls each one of us “beloved child,” treasures us more than life itself, and has claimed us as God's own forever. It is my prayer that as we reflect on such extravagant grace, we will find our lives overflowing with gratitude and joy for such a king. May that gratitude show itself in our eagerly tending to those with whom Jesus identified: the sick, the imprisoned, the hungry, the naked—anyone who is in need. Let us persist daily in trying to become more and more like the King we adore. On this Sunday before Thanksgiving – this time of harvest and abundance – and before we enter the season of Advent, I wonder how we as a church will extend the kind of hospitality Jesus is talking about here. How can we imagine another world in which the needs of the least are met? Who are the people to whom you might reach out? And in doing so what surprises might you learn or receive? How do we share this call to compassion and respond to it?

Our mission to be sheep should never, must never, be about a desire to earn salvation for ourselves. Rather, our mission to be sheep must always be firmly rooted in an understanding that by nourishing the hungry and thirsty, by clothing the naked, by caring for the stranger, the sick and the imprisoned, we are being most authentically and truly human. The world doesn't need more sheep or goats. What it needs is more human beings, created in the of God, honoring the image of God in those who seem to be most different, and journeying together into the rich and uncertain world of equality, justice, and eternal life.

It is also common at the beginning of a New Year to make those resolutions, being determined to be a better person in the New Year. As we approach the upcoming Advent Season, we should resolve to open our hearts to those who are the least among us, those with whom our King most closely identifies, those whom He calls us to serve. So that when our time comes to stand before Him, there won't be any surprises. We will know Him, and he will know us. And the words we will hear, will be those most welcome words, “Come O blessed of my Father; inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”

Beloved, the judgment has been rendered, and by the grace and mercy of God, we have been found to be the people of God's pasture and the sheep of God's hand. Our Good Shepherd has drawn us to himself, and here at this table he feeds us with his own life – on the good pasture of forgiveness, mercy and love. Filled with our Shepherd's love, we are set free to bear that love to all the suffering world. By God's grace you will receive the reward of the righteous—eternal life in his kingdom. Dear Christian, God in his grace has made you one of his sheep. Now follow your Good Shepherd in faith and do the good works God has prepared for you to do. And you will receive the eternal kingdom God has prepared for you, as well. **Amen**