

Saved With The Sheep

Matthew 25:31-46

November 20, 2011

I.

We think New Year's Eve comes at the end of December. That's true according to our regular calendar, which is based on the earth's movement around the sun. The church year, however, is not based on the sun, but rather the history of our faith.

Today is the last Sunday after Pentecost, a type of spiritual New Year's Eve. Next Sunday is the first Sunday of Advent when the new church year begins, and we say Happy New Year to ourselves. And our spiritual focus will change for a while. We will hear more about Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior rather than as a preacher, teacher, or healer.

Today marks that transition, and is celebrated throughout the church as Christ the King Sunday. Jesus now describes himself today as the Messiah, coming again in judgment.

And a common theme in today's readings is our Christian obligation to witness to the Gospel, and to reach out and help others in need, so to assist us at that great day of accounting.

To set the stage for that thought, I might speculate, as I have before, about what would happen if Jesus returned to earth early, *incognito*, to get a look before he really returns. Now, I realize Scripture doesn't say anything about a sneak preview, but I ask you to indulge me anyway.

If Jesus came back ahead of time where would he be? On the golf course? Driving a Lexus? Attending a corporate board meeting? No, not likely. And I'm not being critical here. People who play golf or drive a Lexus can love Jesus and be faithful people just as much as anyone else.

But if we really wanted to find Jesus, he would be where he always was. We would look for him today where he was two thousand years ago. We would find him with the poor, the needy, those rejected by society, and those for whom hope is a distant memory.

He would be sitting in shelters with men aged beyond their years, or walking with disillusioned women carrying everything they own to nowhere in particular. He would be with people sleeping in their cars, or struggling with addictions, illness, or other burdens that beset this broken world.

But this is hypothetical. Jesus is not coming back early. And we cannot expect God to wave his hand and solve these problems. It is up to us. Just as Jesus commissioned the disciples then, he has commissioned us now, as the church, to do what he would do if he were here.

II.

Today's Gospel is one of the classic readings on that point. And while today's Gospel also lends itself to different interpretations of details concerning the end of the age, it is clear about our responsibility now to take the church into the community.

The reading begins with the glorified Jesus sitting on the judgment throne with all the nations gathered before him. And it symbolically tells that he will separate them as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. Those who are sheep will inherit God's kingdom, and those who are goats will be sent to eternal punishment.

And what will be the difference? What will be the ticket out of the goat pen and into the sheep pen? Sometimes we associate God's judgment with immoral, unethical, or illegal conduct. But today's lesson is entirely different. It's a story of errors of omission, of a failure to act.

Jesus made the point by referring to himself. Speaking about this future time, he told of how people cared for him, and fed him, and clothed him, and took care of him when he was sick. And then he spoke of when people did not do those things.

At first this was confusing because Jesus portrayed his listeners as taking him literally. Those assembled began to think back about whether or not they actually had cared for Jesus himself.

But that's not what he meant. Christ identified so closely with the people that their suffering was his suffering. This is why when people cared for the least of humanity they cared for him, and when they rejected the least of humanity they rejected him. And the reading tells us those choices determined who was among the sheep, and who was among the goats.

So for us today, this story shows that our response to the least of humanity also is our response to Jesus. Helping the needy is accepting Christ, and rejecting the needy is rejecting Christ. If we take this literally, we might believe that our future in eternity depends only upon whether or not we care for those less fortunate than ourselves.

But there's more to this reading in two ways. One applies to us collectively as the church and the other affects us individually as ourselves.

III.

Let's first turn to our community of faith. Jesus spoke beyond his disciples to the church he knew he would leave behind. And this understanding of the reading is especially important because it is through the church that people can do the work today's Gospel calls them to do.

And we might consider the church's role by starting with what it does not do. For example, We don't just identify a program to help those less fortunate, and then simply go help them and do nothing more. Charities and social service agencies can do that. And I'm not criticizing charities and social service agencies. They are an important part of society in many ways.

And we don't just leave it at simply taking meals to the hungry, or working in a homeless shelter, or volunteering to work in a food line, and do nothing more. Good hearted atheists can do that. And I'm not criticizing atheists, although I despair at the thought of their eternal fate.

Here is where the church is different, and where the church does something more. When we help people in need we also do so in the name of Jesus Christ. Some things we cannot control, but whether we work and speak in the name of our Lord certainly is within our power.

I hope you have seen our Senior Warden's article in this month's newsletter about some of our outreach programs. One of them is the financial help we offer to people who cannot pay utility bills, or buy groceries, or afford gas to look for a job, or have other pressing needs.

I meet with all of them and discuss their situations. And they do not leave until we pray together, and I talk to them about being part of a church community here or somewhere else where they can transform their lives. Jesus is in the room. That always must be part of our outreach.

Helping others also affects us individually. We know we are saved by our faith. But we also know that faith is evidenced by things we do as Christians. If good works do not naturally flow from faith, then perhaps that presumed faith is something less than it appears. Today's reading about helping the needy is an example of good works that authenticate our faith.

This leads into how this story of the sheep and goats can affect us individually. While we can help others now through the church, we also want to inherit the kingdom later.

I am reminded of the man who fell into a bed of quicksand. Confucius saw the fellow's situation and said, "This man will learn from his experience." Then Buddha observed the man's plight and said, "Let this be a lesson to the rest of the world." Mohammed came by and said, "Alas, it is the will of Allah." Finally, Jesus appeared and said, "Take my hand brother, I will save you."

That is the message. It shows that Christians are different. Certainly social workers, atheists, and other religions always can help the needy. But they don't do it in Christ's name as in today's reading. And when we do it in Christ's name we show our character as sheep.

IV.

So, how do we approach outreach at St. Thomas? I might mention a recent discussion at our St. Thomas Roundtable. The topic was outreach, and it became apparent that there was not unanimity on the meaning of that activity.

Some people thought we should reach out into the community and bring more people into the church to experience Christ. Others, however, were talking about taking the church into the community to help the needy. Two entirely different views of outreach. Both are important and both are necessary.

And on this point, St. Thomas is somewhat unique. I mentioned that we help people who are about to have their electricity cut off, or cannot feed their children a decent meal. However, 99.9% of them do not come from Diamondhead, but rather the surrounding area.

But that does not mean there is no mission field in Diamondhead. There certainly is. But for the most part it is not driven by economic factors. Here in Diamondhead the thirst and hunger Jesus mentioned in today's reading also can relate to spiritual, as well as material, needs.

I think this is why our Roundtable discussion on outreach went in two different directions. Some of us were speaking of reaching out to fill the spiritual needs of people around us. Others were speaking of the need to get in our cars and drive to route 603 and turn either left or right.

V.

This will continue to be on our Roundtable agenda. Please come and offer your insights. We want to carry our Christian duty to the community and do what today's Gospel calls us to do.

And we do not lack for ideas. Our ministry booklet in the foyer offers many ways to serve the Lord. Other ideas have been offered at the Roundtable. Many of you might have a good idea right now. Please share it with us.

But we also need people to put those ideas into practice, and to work in and support our ministries, whether we are retired or still working.

For those of us who still are working, God will find a way. Our families and jobs will not suffer because we do the Lord's work. Susan and I have experienced it. Time unexplainably seems to expand. Things seem to get done. The ball seems to bounce our way.

And for those of us whose careers are behind us, we still need you. Our Christian duties continue always. There is no senior discount in the Bible. Susan and I also know that. You know it. And God understands us and will use us now in different ways. But I tell you this; if you want to push the sun back up in the sky again, God will show you the way to do it.

So I pray that we all are sheep. No goats here. And as we listen to the Holy Spirit, and as we do what we know our Lord calls us to do, we are blessed, the church is strengthened, and those in need will know Christ's love. *Amen.*