



Sermons from

“In Christ’s Image”

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Christ the King Sunday

Matthew 25:31-46

As a young boy, I grew up going to summer camp at a place called Alpine Camp for Boys in Mentone, Alabama, in the southernmost part of the Appalachia Mountains. For competition throughout the camp session, we were divided up into two tribes: Cherokees in red and Mohawks in blue. Looking back on the tradition, it’s hard not to wonder about cultural sensitivity in selecting the names of these two teams. Furthermore, knowing that the original Cherokees were in what is now the Southern U.S. and the Mohawks were in upstate New York and Canada, one wonders with the red versus blue colors someone wasn’t reenacting our own nation’s civil war with proxy tribes. But I digress.

The selection process went something like this. Those of us who had relatives already in a certain tribe got first choice, much like some elite universities have done in the past. The rest of us were all lined up and a counselor came thru and divided the line. One to the left and the other right: the Cherokees and the Mohawks, the sheep and the goats. From then on, for the rest of the summer and every year came back, you were a part of that group. These were your brothers, your teammates. This division determined your identity – both as a group and somewhat individually – and ultimately your destiny. You see, at the end of each camp session, the counselors tallied up all the points from every event and competition, all the merits and demerits, and then declared the overall winner. This final result or final judgment, if you will, gave us all something to strive for, something to aspire to through the few weeks we were there. And at the end of every term, there were cries of joy and tears of sorrow as the winners celebrated and the losers mourned.

Passage

The passage in front of us today also divides a group. It is a tough and beautiful passage, and it will take some deep deciphering to fully understand what is going on. This passage is not a parable to teach us a lesson, but rather an apocalyptic scene reminiscent of the Book of Daniel and Revelation. There is a revealing going on. And yet it is not God on the throne as king but the Son of Man, or perhaps a better translation, the Child of Humanity. Everyone from all the nations – not just the Jews, mind you – gather before Christ the King, this Child of Humanity, and like a shepherd he separates them, one from another, the sheep to his right and the goats to his left.

Here the Child of Humanity identifies some essential desires of the human race, and how each group responded to these needs... or not. Notably, these acts of kindness are universally recognized by other religions and the pagans of the time. Far from an exclusivity claim, we have here a universal message about the essential needs of hunger and thirst, housing and clothing, and finally visiting those sick and in prison. But there is one crucial difference: “just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” The mystery of Christ hides in the naked and the hungry, the sick and the lonely (Rob Bell).

The king's prescription is a bit odd, don't you think? No record of church attendance, no proclamation of Jesus as Lord and Savior. In fact, it sounds quite work-based rather than saved by grace? Where is the grace in this passage? The king identifies as one of his subjects. There is an incredible solidarity shown. And yet an incredible division, too.

The truth is, we do not need a judge to divide us. We're pretty good at doing that ourselves. Our world is already divided without judgment day coming. From Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland to Republicans and Democrats here, from job creators to job seekers, from the 1% to 99%, we don't need someone to divide us. We've taken care of that already.

I thought Christ the King was supposed to unite us, not divide us. Who or what is going to unite us, if not our coming savior? What happened to the unity in every knee shall bow and every tongue confess, as we heard Paul write in Philippians last week?

Eternal Punishment?

And then we come to perhaps the most troubling part of our passage. Those to the left receive eternal punishment - NOT for anything they have DONE WRONG, but for failing to do what is **right**.

Let's take a look at this phrase "eternal punishment" in the Greek. After all, this is the only instance in the New Testament this exact phrasing occurs. (Much of the following comes from Rob Bell's *Love Wins* and Gerry Beauchemin's *Hope Beyond Hell*. I highly recommend both books for those interested in the topic.)

The Greek word *aion*, here translated "eternal," is actually closer to our English equivalent of "eon" – that is, period, age to come; God's time. *Aion* thus does not mean "forever" or "eternal," but rather links closer to "eon" or "a period of time."

The Greek word translated here as "punishment" is *kólasís*. Barclay describes *kólasís* as remedial punishment; the interest being on the good of the sufferer. In fact, the term comes from an agricultural setting, like much of the language of the New Testament, and is associated with "pruning" a plant; not punishing it. As such, there is a corrective purpose in the Child of Humanity's Edict: The goats are condemned to a "period of pruning," "a time of trimming," ...as long as they refuse to assist those in need.

(Finally, for the Calvinists among us, one interesting note: The sheep are to enter a kingdom prepared since the foundation of the world, indicating it was always God's intention or hope that all of the lost sheep will be found. However, there is no foundational place for the goats – it's simply where the devil and his angels are already. The goats enter this place as a result of their own neglect rather than God's original intention.)

If not Judgment, then what?

So if this passage is not centrally about universal judgment and eternal condemnation, what is Matthew trying to tell us? Let me first say that there is a distinction between the Gospel of Goats and the Gospel of Sheep. The Gospel of Goats operates on the principles of fear and scarcity, much like our economic system. Like Goats, we are stubborn with our time or money, holding onto our own and looking out for number one. In contrast, the Gospel of Sheep operates on the principles of trust and abundance. Like sheep, we are called to wander, to share our resources with one another, to bind one another in a

common destiny where Christ is at the center of our lives, where we share in service to Christ when we serve others.

We are a divided society desperately needing to learn to live together. All of us are exposed in some way: if not to the elements then to loss, to pain; all of us have been affected by the economic downturn. Yet there are those who are overexposed and underexposed. The overexposed are those whose picture has faded, seek restoration that can only come through the help of others. Christ's Image is still there, but it has faded. Then there are those who are underexposed, who have not ventured out of their comfort zone to see Christ in the world. They, too, retain Christ's Image, but it is underdeveloped and waiting to be engaged with others so its true colors might shine through.

And that is where we are in our passage today and in our present society. We are all exposed, unsure of each other and what's happening to us. What are we to do in the face of growing needs in our community and vast government budget cuts and corporate layoffs? How are we going to respond to our neighbor in pain or church member in grief? Will we ascribe to the Gospel of Goats and be stubborn and closed off in a world of fear and scarcity, or will we trust and open ourselves up to live out the Gospel of Sheep, wandering into a world of trust and abundance?

Seeing the Image of Christ, Imago Dei, in everyone

The vision cast in Matthew is one of communal salvation. We are saved not by a statement or creed, but by helping each other. In serving others we serve Christ. The Child of Humanity is inside all of us, waiting to be revealed in food for the hungry and drink for the thirsty; in housing for the homeless and clothing for the naked; in taking care of the sick and visiting those in prison. We are to overcome our divisions by seeing the Image of God in everyone. Many of us have taken strides to do this, serving on Wednesdays at the Delonis Center. Others will volunteer this January to house 35 homeless men here in our church building. Where might you trust God to wander out into the world?

Helping one another is about recognizing the Christ Image in all of us. When it's revealed to us in those we help, then we also feel it within our hearts. In Christ, there is no sheep or goat, Cherokee or Mohawk. All are one. Christ is ready to awaken within you, within me, within each of us. There is a knock on the door as those in need cry out. Will we answer?

Conclusion

In this season of Thanksgiving, may we be thankful to God and giving to others. May we seek out the lost so that the last in society are the first in our hearts and minds. "The mystery [of Christ] hides in the naked and the hungry, the sick and the lonely" (Bell). May we have the eyes to see and the hearts to feel Christ's presence among us. Amen.

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