

Sermon, November 22, 2020

Good morning! Welcome to Stay-At-Home worship from St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Oakland, Maryland. I am Pastor Scott Robinson, and today we welcome back our good friends and St. Mark's Music Directors Debi and Sean Beachy, who are providing Special Music. We are still waiting for a safe time to resume public worship. New pandemic cases, hospitalizations and deaths are at record highs. Both the CDC and our own ELCA say people who are at high risk for serious illness from Coronavirus should NOT attend indoor worship services in person, and those who regularly spend time with families or friends in high risk groups shouldn't either.

We do not want to endanger anyone unnecessarily. Which is why we are here, worshipping together even though safely apart. Meanwhile, if you want to help St. Mark's pay its bills and keep its mission and benevolence commitments during these difficult times, there is a secure Donate button on the church's website, which is stmarksoakland.com. You can also now donate through our Facebook page.

Now today's stupid joke. I ran into an old Dental School friend last week, and he asked, "What are you doing in Garrett County?" And I said, "I retired after twenty years, went to seminary and I am now the pastor of St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Oakland." I asked, "What are you doing in Garrett County?" And he said I retired a few years ago too, and bought a sheep farm up around Grantsville." I said, "Really? How many sheep do you have?" And he said, I don't know. Every time I try to count them, I fall asleep." Hold that thought...

Music

The Lord be with you. Let us pray. Almighty and everlasting God, whose will it is to restore all things to your beloved Son, whom you anointed priest forever and king of all creation: Grants that all the people of the earth, now divided by the power of sin, may be united under the glorious and gentle rule of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever, **Amen.**

A reading from Ephesians, the first chapter.

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.

God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Here ends the reading.

The Holy Gospel of the Lord, according to Matthew, the twenty-fifth chapter.

Jesus said to the Disciples, "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that 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 something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me,

I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'

Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink,

I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?'

Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

The Gospel of the Lord.

Let us pray. God of Wisdom, may your word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen.

Today is the last Sunday in the church year, and it is officially known as the Feast of the Solemnity of Christ the King; although it hasn't been called that for very long. Christ the King Sunday was the brainchild of Pope Pius the 11th back in 1925. As popes go, Pius was my kind of guy. He was more scholarly and more interested in science and history than perhaps any other pope. He studied his Hebrew and had a deep appreciation of the Jewish roots of our Christian faith.

Pius doubled the number of Catholic missionaries in the world—and not just to drum-up more Catholics, but to get the Church more involved in meeting basic human needs.

Pius was a champion of social justice issues, standing up for religious freedom and the independence of the church. He openly condemned racism, and especially the growing anti-Semitism of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy.

1925 was a scary time in Europe. Joseph Stalin was rising to power in the fledgling Soviet Union. Benito Mussolini had wrestled dictatorial control over Italy. Meanwhile in Germany, rising political populist Adolph Hitler had just published his book titled, "Mein Kampf."

Some think Pius invented Christ the King Sunday as a subtle way of saying to folks like Stalin, Hitler and Mussolini, "CHRIST is OUR King. Not you."

As a retired dentist I always appreciate it when on Christ the King Sunday we sing the hymn, “Crown Him With Many Crowns.” (Ah...the memories...) And on this particular Sunday our gospel readings always have something to do with Christ in the role of King. This year he is shepherd king on the heavenly throne at the end times separating sheep from goats--metaphorical representations of heaven-bound saints and sinners headed to the other place.

As you probably know by now, I am not one to read the Bible one verse at a time. The Bible is made up of many different literary genres, including legal codes, poetry, prose, narratives, prayers, letters, sermons and songs and no single verse was ever meant to stand alone. The Bible is not a collection of proverbs.

In fact, even the Book of Proverbs is not really a book of proverbs. But that’s another sermon. That said, there is probably no single verse that has shaped my faith understanding more than the one in today’s reading where Jesus said, “Just as you did it to one of the least of these...you did it to me.” To me, that is an excellent summary of what practical Christianity is all about.

Of course this particular reading has been known to raise some questions, as well as a few eyebrows, especially among us Lutherans. Because we’re the champions of Apostle Paul’s notion that salvation is by God’s grace through faith alone and cannot be earned by human efforts, regardless how noble.

Yet today Jesus himself implied that whether you enter the kingdom or the eternal fire is pretty much based on what you do or don’t do. Perplexed by how un-Lutheran that sounds, I looked-up Martin Luther’s own sermon based on this text, written and preached the year 1544. It’s a sermon he entitled, “Judgment Day.” And if you want to know how Luther handled the implied works righteousness of Matthew 25, between us, not very well.

First he said Christians are already sheep and don't have to worry about judgment. Except of course goats like Cardinals, Bishops and Popes and those Catholics who blindly follow them; and also Muslims, (or "Turks" as he called them), who Luther said were also goats destined for damnation. It must have also been budget season in Wittenberg at the time as well, because Luther used this particular sermon to urge the Church to pay more money to pastors and teachers—a rather brazen move I'd say, considering Luther at the time was a pastor and a teacher.

All things considered, I don't think even Martin Luther dealt very effectively with the works-based judgment implied in today's reading. So let me try.

Jesus likened people of the nations to sheep and goats, and the Son of Man--that would be him—to their shepherd. And while that was a probably great metaphor for his immediate audience, it was mostly lost on me. Because frankly I didn't know much about sheep or goats or shepherds. Until now.

Turns out sheep are very closely related to goats, and they ARE often herded together even today, especially in the Near East. There are many different varieties of sheep and goats, and some of them look a lot alike. One easy way to tell them apart is to listen. While sheep say "baaah," goats mostly say "meehh." But I saw on Youtube that goats can also sound like everything from babies crying to grown-ups yelling.

I learned that separating sheep from goats WAS (and still is) a routine task for Near Eastern shepherds. For one thing, goats have hair, not wool, and need to be sheltered from the cool nights of Palestinian winters. Those winters are just fine for the sheep. They have nice warm sweaters!

Shepherds also separate their mixed flocks in order to milk the goats and shear the sheep. I learned that goats usually point their tails upward unless they are stressed, while sheep's tails always point down. Both

can have horns, but the horns are different in form and composition. Sheep are called “grazers,” because they eat short grasses and clover, while goats are called “browsers,” because they eat leaves, twigs, vines and shrubs.

A goat can stand on its back legs and reach up for food. Sheep normally keep their noses to the ground. When sheep graze, they only eat the tops of grasses and clover, allowing the plants to grow back. When Goats browse, on the other hand, they will eat plants all the way down to their roots, often killing them. In the Talmud, (the ancient collection of rabbinic writings) the rabbis referred to goats as armed robbers, because they often jumped fences and tore-up the neighbors’ gardens and mangled their fruit trees.

Sheep are generally docile, while goats can be quite rambunctious. Sheep stay close to each other in flocks for protection since they have no natural defenses. Goats, on the other hand, are more independent; and I read that you don’t want to go anywhere near a goat that’s in a bad mood.

So see? Even though I still don’t know a whole lot about sheep and goats, I can tell them apart based on what they say, how they act and what they do. And I think today maybe Jesus was saying the same thing.

His point wasn’t, “Do this and you’ll go to heaven, or don’t and you won’t.”

He was instead saying, “I know my sheep. They are my peeps. And they are easily recognizable by the sorts of things they say and do.” No, you can’t always go JUST by what they say.

Because some of Christ’s sheep really don’t like speaking openly about matters of faith. But even if they don’t say much you still can’t help but notice the sorts of things they do and the way they treat both strangers and each other. They tend to be kind, mild-mannered and supportive.

The sort of folks who would rather say nothing than an unkind word. Christ's sheep AREN'T ones to sit back smugly and point fingers and criticize. They are instead more likely to step forward in life's various states of messiness and ask, "How can I help?"

Christ's sheep seem to have a natural inclination to look out for others, probably because they know firsthand how their God looks out for them. They'll always have your back—as the saying goes. Because they know their God has theirs.

You'll recognize Christ's sheep because they welcome strangers, even the ones who don't look or think or talk the same way they do. And they really DO feed the hungry and visit the sick and those in prison. If you slight them or cross them, finger-point or gossip behind their backs they'll likely get over it.

Because most of them are bold enough to pray every day that God will forgive THEIR sins the same way they've learned to forgive yours. Christ's sheep ALSO tend to huddle together and rally around those who are sad or lonely or struggling. They do that because they know God comes to them when they struggle too.

And no, they aren't trying to earn the kingdom by doing the sorts of things they do. They trust the kingdom is already theirs, because of what Jesus has done for them.

What tipped me off was verse 37, where the disciples asked "Lord, when did we do all these great things to you?" And he said "Every time you do them to each other."

And they seemed surprised by that answer. Because, "What's in it for me?" never really crosses their minds.

So that's my Lutheran take on what is often called the Parable of the Sheep and Goats. Even though it's not really a parable. And it's not really about sheep and goats. Or for that matter Catholics or Muslims,

or pastors and teachers looking for a raise. It is instead the story of regular old sinners who every now and then look and act and sound a lot like saints. All because of a certain shepherd who manages to love them anyway. In spite of themselves.

Amen.
