

"Sheep and goats and judgment, O my..."
by Rev. Frances Savill
Christ the King Sunday
November 26, 2023

Matthew 25:31-46

Let me begin this morning with a confession. Most of you will know that I do not usually have clever titles for my messages, and this week is no exception. The clever title for this message comes from David Lose, a preacher I greatly respect.

And he begins his message by saying that most of us read this passage of the sheep and the goats and think "yikes". I have to admit that's how I see it.

The text begins with this wonderful picture, Jesus returning in glory. I rejoice in this picture that Jesus paints: ***"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. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him,"***

And then there is judgement, all the nations of the world, all of us before the throne, and Jesus starts to divide everyone – just like a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.

And so far I'm good, I believe that God is going to judge us – and things will be set right. I think part of what is troubling with this text is that everyone is surprised. The sheep are surprised they are sheep, and that they ministered to Jesus. The goats are surprised they are goats, and that they did not minister to Jesus.

No one in the text argues the judgment, or that they did or did not care for the least, the sick, the imprisoned, the naked, and hungry. It seems that none in Jesus' story recognized Jesus during their life on earth. Everyone is surprised that when we serve the least, we serve Jesus.

And so maybe that is the first lesson of the parable. If you want to serve Jesus, you'll find him amongst people who are in need. There are people who are hungry in our midst, children who don't have food in the house as

they go off to school. There are people in our nursing homes who need someone to feed them, someone to visit them. We still have prisons, and people without proper clothing. If there is someone in need, I think they are included in Jesus' list of "the least of these".

Today is Christ the King Sunday, it is the end of the church year, next Sunday is the beginning of the new church year, and our hymns and scriptures remind us that Jesus is in fact the reigning and returning King overall.

I have friends who when asked how they are doing would respond that Jesus is on the throne, and so their world was fine. I like that. Jesus is our living, reigning King, things in the universe are as they should be, and so I am good.

And I, and all of us, are called to live now, in light of Jesus' reign. We are called to participate in Jesus' Kingdom. We are to be part of bringing in Jesus' kingdom in its fullness.

What will it look like when Jesus' kingdom is established in its fullness? All people will have enough food, everyone will be paid fairly for their work, everyone will care for one another, there would be justice, an end to war and violence, we would all live rightly with one another.

We are to participate in that kingdom now, and be part of establishing it, and extend the kingdom now, until it is established in all the ends of the earth.

It means trusting in the words of Ephesians, 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"*** (1:18-19).

God calls us to a different way of being in the world. At the end of the day, to claim Christ as king, to believe in God's reign, has to be a claim on our present, and not just the future.

How we decide to live matters. Not just for ourselves. Not just for those immediately around us. But we live for the sake of participating the reign of Christ here and now.

So, at the beginning of a new church year, maybe our resolution might include, "My New Year's resolution is to strive for how to make the reign of Christ more possible for my neighbor." How would Advent and Christmas be different if that was our resolution now?

We have filled our advent boxes with food to share, so students would have something to eat as they finish the semester and write papers and final exams. We will do it again next week. Throughout Advent we'll be hearing the difference our gifts make in many places in the world through our gifts to Presbyterian World Service and Development. And we will have an opportunity to learn more about how to respond to homelessness.

Every day we have opportunities to live God's reign; to share generously, to bless and care, to visit and feed. We will not be able to do everything, and we will not be able to meet the needs of everyone. But we can do something today, and we can do something tomorrow – show our care, be gracious. We can care for one person. We can bless the people we meet throughout our day, just by how we act and are.

At our Bible study on Tuesday, Arlene shared with us about a bus driver who drove the route she was on every day. He greeted and engaged with every person who got on his bus – friendly, kind, a positive word for each one. Arlene had a chance to ask him about it one day. It turns out he was a Christian and he saw what he did as a ministry.

And in the end of all of things, when Jesus returns in glory, and all the nations of the earth are gathered before him, he will invite those who cared for the least, who bore the fruit of the gospel good news, to enter the kingdom that was prepared for them.

They lived in the kingdom in this life, and they will celebrate in the kingdom for all eternity. The last word of the parable is giving to the goats:

"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?’⁴⁵ 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.’⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

But this is not the last word of the gospel.

"When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, ² "You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified." (Matthew 26:1)

Jesus is now heading to the cross, he will be denied, betrayed, arrested, and killed. His words on the cross are of forgiveness, and he dies for the sin of the whole world, so that we might be healed and forgiven.

He was raised from death to life, and is seated on the throne, where he reigns, and his kingdom is being established on earth in its fullness.

We are not saved because we care for the least, but because we are saved, because Jesus’ came to teach us and bring us healing and life, we are now free to live together in a new way – caring for the least, the last, and the lost. And we are invited to live in Jesus’ reign now, this day, ready for our Master’s return whenever it is. **Thanks be to God.**

Prayer:

Gracious God, remind us today that Jesus reigns over all, that He is seated at the right hand of the Father, and all things are subject to his rule and authority, so we will not be afraid.

Quieten our fears, so that our hearts will be open to the people in need around us. Remind us that though we cannot help everyone, we can help someone, and together we are a transforming power in your world through the enabling power of your Holy Spirit. Thank you, Lord, for these faithful people, who live in your kingdom now, and will celebrate with you in the life to come. Amen.