

Sunday, November 22, 2020
Christ the King Sunday

Sermon, Pastor Dane Wood

We have made it to the end of the year! YAY! 2020 is over! Well... not really, but in church terms it is. Today is Christ the King Sunday and that marks the end of the Church Calendar. That means Advent starts next week and then CHRISTMAS! I know for some, you can't stand this...radio stations are already playing Christmas music and it's not even Thanksgiving yet. We barely know what we are doing in this COVID time and now holidays are just making everything way more complicated. Next week we're starting that Christmas/Advent jive, the decorations in the church will change, at least a little, you'll see some of it in the recordings. We'll set up some new decorations this year outside, try and be a little festive in these hard times. But... before we get there, we need to know why we do it. Why do we care about Christmas at all?

Jesus is born, big deal, people are born all the time. But Jesus is different. How so? He's our savior, the Son of God. This Sunday is about that story, who Christ is, not just who he is as a person but what is his role, his authority, his position. As I said earlier, today is Christ the King Sunday. It is the moment in the season when Christ reveals himself for who he really is. It's the end of the Church year. It is the end of the Gospel of Matthew as far as preaching goes. It marks an ending and a new beginning.

The reason I say all this, is because it is a design we don't always see. We have been going through Matthew all year, with a short jaunt through Romans in August and September, but if you really paid attention, Matthew showed up those weeks too; and now we are at the great climax of Matthew's Gospel, the peak of the message right before we start coming down to the Cross. Christians churches all over the world are celebrating the same thing this week. We

finish our reading and study of Matthew, and then go into the new church year, starting with Advent and Christmas, and then we will start reading John and Mark. The year after that it will be Luke, and then the whole cycle repeats itself. Each year, on the last Sunday before Advent, we hit Christ the King Sunday. I want you to think about our readings today, and consider it the last words you will ever hear from Christ. It is the end of the year, the end of his public ministry.

Jesus has been building us up to this point, preparing us with many a direct and even harsh parable at times. We've learned about the oil for our lamps, and the "talents" God has given us, learning that using them, not storing them, is the key to this faith. Jesus has called out the Pharisees and Sadducees, the scribes and leaders of the church, accusing them of hoarding their oil and talents, and now, to finish his final sermon, he's no longer accusing just them, he's accusing us. This text this week is hard to preach because he is so direct. There is not all this context I have to spell out, or break down, but... I am going to try anyway, it's my job.

"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." Christ is King. He is stating it openly now. I am the Son of Man, and I will sit on the throne. Christ will pass judgment from the seat of power. "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." Christ is King of all the world, not just 'his' people, not just those claiming to be Christian, but all the world. We, all of humanity, are God's Children, we are all part of Christ's flock.

Wait... hold up... What about Jews, and Muslims, Buddhists, and the like? Americans or Chinese or Nigerians? Everyone is part of Christ's flock? That is what the book says. This is something we too often gloss over. We read this text and jump to the separating of sheep and

goats, and yet ignore some of the truth that is right before our eyes. Christ has all the nations together and it is Christ who has to separate them. That means we are all bunched up in one group. If you are a shepherd of sheep and goats, walking around the hillsides, do you always keep two separate herds? No, it is a waste of time and makes no sense. Sheep and goats both eat the same thing, and are used for many of the same things, and they generally get along with each other. You keep one flock, lead them around the fields and mountains, and only separate them when it is time to pick some out to eat, or milk, or shear. The sinners and the saints are one group, one flock... one church. We are often too quick to make those "us and them" statements. If 'we' the church do this right, then 'they' the sinners will come sit in our pews and fill the rows, well, or these days, fill up our comments and click up that viewer ticker in the corner. No, that is not how it works. There is only Christ and Us. If 'we' the church do this right, then 'we' the sinners will come. The Sheep and the Goats are in the same herd until that final moment when Jesus takes his throne.

Alright, we are all one group, but Christ very clearly states that he will separate. There will be judgment. That is correct and there is no running away from that, which so many of us want to do. We love talking about the Christ who loves, and hate talking about the Christ who judges, but in my mind, that is the best Christ. There will be a judgment, but how will the flock be judged? By who our parents were? Nope. By our career choices? Nope. On our good deeds? Maybe... On our beliefs? maybe again. In first passing of this text, Jesus seems to be stating that the way into the Kingdom of Heaven is to earn it through good deeds.

"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." The Sheep do these things and in reward

are granted a place on the right side of the throne, both literally and figuratively. And on the other hand, the Goats, "I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ 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." They end up on the left. Sorry to my south-paws in the crowd. Right is good and left is bad, that is just how it worked in the ancient world. The right hand was for good things like work and food, the left was for the dirty work.

And so this story is very simple. Do good work and you'll earn your way into heaven. But is it that simple...? Nope, sorry, got to read a little closer. We know and believe as Methodists that Salvation cannot be earned through good works, it's a freely given gift from God, that we acknowledge through belief/faith. So this parable by Christ, this final point to his last sermon, is really confusing and seems to tell me otherwise. Well, let us read through this again, cause what we need to know is there.

When we read this too quickly, we see this simple story about good deeds, and the judgment, the splitting of goats and sheep. I've already pointed out that we can't jump the gun on the judgment part, and so we need to slow down on the good deeds part as well.

"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; ³⁵ 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, ³⁶ 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.' ³⁷ 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?** ³⁸ **And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing?** ³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' ⁴⁰ 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, ⁴¹ you did it to me.' ⁴¹ 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; ⁴² for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ 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.' ⁴⁴ 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.”

One of the curious things that jumps out at me, as I read this slowly, and I emphasized it, is the fact that no one knew who Jesus was, or where he was, or what he looked like. The sheep did not know they were doing these good things for Christ. And the Goats did not know they were not doing them for Christ. It is a mystery to them both. So not only are the Sheep and Goats kept together in the same herd, neither of them knows exactly what they are doing, or who they are doing things for or not for. The saints and sinners both do not recognize Jesus when they are out in the world, helping or not helping others. This is where the difference starts to come in. The sheep do their good works, not knowing who they are doing it for, so they see nothing to gain, no status to increase, no benefit to themselves. They do not feed the hungry because Christ commanded them to and Jesus is watching. No, They do it because... well they just do, they help the stranger just because. The sheep do not clothe the poor because it gives them a warm fuzzy feeling on the inside. No, They, like Nike, Just Do It. The Goats on the other hand... are a different story. They do not risk anything for anyone else, and so they lose nothing and gain nothing. They hold back their resources, their “talents”. Unless they stand to gain something, they do nothing. They will help their own family, or someone they can gain status for helping, or when someone else is watching and they will get credit... but not just because.

And I will add in my own interpretation here of the story... The goats probably know more about Christ and God than the sheep. Goats are smarter than sheep, but they can be stubborn. The Goats wait to see Christ before acting on his behalf. They will feed the hungry and help the poor only when they know Christ will notice. The Goats are out trying to earn their

way. They are concerned about these things more than the sheep. The sheep just act, not wondering about the details, they just feel a need to do things. The Goats want a reason to act, they need a push, they need a reward. They will only live a good life if they know they will get heaven and a good afterlife, otherwise, they will just be selfish. And to add more to my own vision of this parable, the Goats are all too happy to separate the flock ahead of time. They want to be recognized for their work, they want to call themselves sheep and puff out their chest. But what Christ reveals is that the 'real' sheep just go about their business, unconcerned about the judgment or the credit, often unseen and unheard. They are not concerned with being a sheep or goat, with themselves, they are concerned with the sick, hungry, and thirsty.

So this interesting inability to see Christ in those we help is shared by sinners and saints alike. The Goats need to see Christ to do good works, and the sheep just do it, not really worried about any sort of reward. Why do the sheep act this way, it's honestly not all that logical? They do good works not because they have to, but instead because they want to. They feel a draw to loving others. It is practically unavoidable for a sheep to help others. They have acknowledged something.

"Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" As the children of God, we are set to inherit the Kingdom of Heaven. There is no earning an inheritance. It is given because of who we are, and that is Christ's. The Kingdom is prepared for those who accept Christ, and in doing this, truly welcoming the love of God in your life, you will then become a sheep. A lot of people used to have these WWJD bracelets. Sheep do not care about WWJD. Sheep do not think about it, they just do, and it is what Jesus would do, because Jesus is in them, and with them through the power of the Holy Spirit.

And so it is not the good work that earns us a spot on the right hand of the throne, the good deeds just happen without us thinking about it. What distinguishes the sheep is accepting we are not our own or someone else's, but we are Christ's sheep and he is our shepherd, and the rest falls into place naturally. The Kingdom of God is prepared, ahead of time, for us all, it is a gift freely given. We have been invited into the flock.

But then what about those Goats? "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;" The Goats are those who do not accept the gift that is given. Or they wait around and try to earn the gift by works. Some are in the flock, others outside it, they are around and many look just like Sheep, but are not.

Sin is not a debt we can pay, one because we are not worthy to pay it, and two, because Christ already cleared the debt, it's just a matter of recognizing that fact. The Goats are still trying to work themselves out of debt or do enough to fool the judge... good luck with that. And these goats are cast to hell, which is not a place for them. It is comforting to know, at least for me, that hell is not for humans. Hell, Christ says, is prepared for the devil and his angels. The Kingdom of God is prepared for us. Those who end up in hell end up in a place they were never meant for, it was never God's intention for us to go there. God has built us a mansion on a hill, laid out fresh new sheets on the bed and cleaned the house and invited us there, this is the place we are intended for. Our sins have been paid for with Christ's blood, the debt removed. And it was not removed when we accepted Christ by our action... these sins were forgiven 2000 years ago, long before we were born and could think for ourselves. Our place as Sheep, our place as children of God who are set to inherit the Kingdom, God's intention for us to have a place in the house... that was set 2000 years ago, the moment Christ became King.

So what remains for us to decide, as this Church Year ends and another begins... Is Christ our King? Will we be Sheep or Goats? The shepherd is calling, will you follow?