

St. Paul's Church, Healdsburg
The Reverend Sally Hanes Hubbell
November 23, 2014

The Last Sunday After Pentecost – Christ the King

Texts: Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Psalm 100; Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46

We've come to the end. Today is the last Sunday of the Christian Year, and next Sunday we begin a new cycle of Scripture readings. Today is called "Christ the King" Sunday because all of the revelation of the previous year, all of the work we've put into discerning who Jesus is—what he means to us and what he requires of us—gets wrapped up today. In other words, all of the revelation that the church has to offer, everything from Advent, to Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, and the "Season after Pentecost" comes to fruition today in the full recognition of Jesus as Christ, the triumphant King of the universe and ruler of the human heart, mind and soul.

You know the saying, "time flies when you're having fun" – and boy has it been flying, so I guess that means we've been having fun! If you've been keeping up with our scripture readings these past many weeks, you know that we've had some significant challenges thrown in our path as we've journeyed to this end of the year. Challenges the size of boulders, and they've all been lobbed by Jesus. We've had one after another of the most difficult parables in the Bible – the vineyard owner who insists on paying a full day's wage to people who only work for an hour; the poor street person who at the last minute is brought into the wedding banquet and then is kicked out for not wearing the right clothes; the "wise and foolish virgins," five of whom get locked out of the eternal wedding banquet because they ran out of oil for their lamps. And then the story of the talents from last week, and that crazy master who hands out his fortune to be managed by others while he's away on some long and mysterious trip. We've had one after another of those parables that make preachers everywhere break out in a cold sweat when they hear them.

Even though there are four different scripture passages each Sunday that a preacher may choose to focus upon in her sermon, I think it would be a big mistake to read a really tough Gospel passage out loud in a church service, as we do every week in worship right before the sermon, and then not address it. This is especially true when it's a Gospel passage that sucks all the air out of the room and makes everyone hearing it say to them selves, "What on earth was that?" Not only would I feel like a coward if I didn't address it, but more importantly I believe the toughest passages often bear the richest yield – if for no other reason because everyone is sitting up and paying attention when a Bible passage makes us question why we even read it, let alone try to glean from it divine wisdom.

So, here we are on Christ the King Sunday, the end of the line in our liturgical year, and our Gospel for this morning isn't a whole lot easier than the others we've had recently. On the surface it seems pretty straightforward: feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the sick and lonely if you want to stay on God's good side. But could it really be so easy?

This parable is called "The Great Judgment" and indeed, it sounds rather judgmental. Like last week's parable about the poor schmoo who buried his talent,

there's a really scary image of eternal punishment here – in this case for the “goats” at the king's left hand.

You may have noticed that there is a lot of death and destruction in all of our parables of late. The context for that is we've been reading from the chapters in Matthew's Gospel that take place between Palm Sunday and Good Friday. Interestingly, we end the year with Jesus' final teaching as a free and healthy man, but on the eve of him entering that liminal space of the Last Supper and the Garden of Gethsemane when he will be dragged off to be tortured and killed. That makes for an interesting start for kingship, doesn't it?

You may remember a few weeks back I made the point that one reason these parables are particularly full of damnation, hell fire and death is because the stakes are so high –the tension is as taunt as it gets right at this point in the Gospel. And we have to remember that the physical reality of judgment for Jesus and for all of the people hearing him speak was every bit as harsh as what Jesus talks about in the parables. Jesus and his contemporaries are living in a world in which they see a daily reality of public floggings, stoning of sinners, and bodies hanging from crosses. It wouldn't do to spiritualize judgment or salvation for anyone living in such a violent and broken world. Quite honestly I don't think it works to spiritualize judgment and salvation for anyone, regardless of when and where they live, but my point is that to take his message out of the physical realities of life, death, pain and suffering would make no sense at all. That is why all of these parables are so stark and brutal in the judgment they offer.

It is tempting to use our parable for today as a prescription for how to get on the right side in the divine sorting that judgment is generally believed to be. I'm certainly not going to argue that it's not a good idea to feed the hungry, cloth the naked, welcome the stranger, and visit the sick and lonely, because I believe Jesus is saying that's essentially what we should do. But I also know that Jesus consistently discourages us from putting stock in any prescriptive formula to win us a place in heaven. Think of the vineyard workers who all get paid the same wage regardless of how long and hard they've worked – that's just one example of many that cautions us AGAINST putting faith in systems of reward or punishment. Because of the hard work we've done to figure out the meaning of all of those difficult parables, *because of the revelation we have had thus far leading up to this last Sunday of the year*, I don't believe Jesus' meaning here can be a simple moral exposition on what it means to be a good sheep or a bad goat.

The image of Jesus here is obviously the Good Shepherd. Jesus is the Shepherd that the prophet Ezekiel promises in our Old Testament lesson who will gather together the flock and *feed them all with Justice*. This is Jesus, as in *the Lord our shepherd who will lead us beside still waters and let goodness and mercy reign all the days of our lives*. The Good Shepherd imagery comes together with Christ the King imagery when we consider the scope of the Good Shepherd's flock: “All the nations will be gathered before him.” This means the whole world – it means not just the nation of Israel, but it means us too. In Jesus, the Good Shepherd has gathered the whole world into one great sheep pen before him – and here is Jesus Christ the king of the universe seated in the center of the whole flock. And from there, with Jesus smack dab in the center, the people will be separated as a shepherd

might separate sheep from goats. Jesus will be the cause of this great roundup and he'll be at its center, and the sheep will be gathered at his right hand, and the goats will be at his left.

There are two important points that have to be made here. The first is that no matter what happens to the goats who go to the left side, they are still part of this gathering that happens all around him when Jesus sits on the throne as Christ the King. Even what is bad, what is evil and painful gets pulled into the sphere of Jesus' kingship, because he will be lord of all –even of death itself. There's no escaping the kingship of Jesus Christ, no matter what side of him we may fall on.

The second point I want to make is that both the sheep and the goats are equally ignorant, and therefore no one in this parable is saved by consciously doing good. Both the sheep and the goats ask the same question of Jesus: "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison?" They are all unaware of Jesus' presence, and therefore none of them are acting in such a way as to win brownie points in heaven – or to secure that coveted pasture at the right hand of the Good Shepherd. The difficult truth that this parable tells us, as do many others, is that *there are no brownie points in heaven*. Whatever good comes our way we must simply accept as grace, or not accept at all.

And that leads me to the only explanation I can offer as to what goes wrong for the goats: they don't accept the good that comes their way. They don't accept a relationship with Jesus in the unexpected guise in which he presents himself. When Jesus comes to them they turn him away because he doesn't look like what they expect him to look like. Unlike the sheep, they aren't willing to accept Jesus on *his* terms.

We have all – all of us in the whole wide world – already been rounded up in the great sheep pen of the Kingdom of God by the Good Shepherd, aka Christ the King. Jesus is here, at the center of it all, *at the center of us all*, and those lucky sheep who interact with him do so simply because they accept his presence in their midst without asking to see his ID first. They get to hang out with Jesus not because they set out to be in the presence of royalty, or even because they want to do whatever they can to be on the right side of judgment when it finally comes, but rather, they get to be with Jesus simply because he's here and they are willing to be here with him, in whatever guise he assumes.

Does that make sense? To put it in the terms of the sermon from last week, the sheep are those who are willing to do business in the spiritual market place. And because Jesus is who he is, because it's his picture on the spiritual currency, when we do business in the spiritual market place he's is always our defacto business partner.

There is one last observation I want to make about our parable for today, and which also sums up well the year in revelation that we're wrapping up. If there's one theme that I think has been important for us to learn, or one truth that has consistently been revealed in all of the parables we've wrestled with together, it's this: any true knowledge of God that we are blessed to have must be tempered with a willingness to let ourselves be surprised by God. God is infinite, while our ability to experience God is finite, and therefore we must be humble whenever we start thinking we've got God figured out. This is why faith is faith, not knowledge. And

it's also why our faith in God, in Jesus the Good Shepherd and in Jesus Christ the King, is always going to surprise us, and it's why it will always be an adventure.
Amen.