

Christ the King Sunday A, 2020 Sermon

Matthew 25:31-46

Jesus said, "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 last Sunday of the Church Year – which is today – is always celebrated as “Christ the King” Sunday, and our Gospel parable today is about the Son of Man (who is also called “king” in this parable) coming in glory to sit on his throne of glory. And all the nations of the world are gathered before him, and he separates them into two groups, according to how they cared for – or did **not** care for – those who were hungry, thirsty, strangers, naked, sick, or imprisoned. The King, the Son of Man, says that in caring or *not* caring for “the least of these,” they were caring or *not* caring for him.

Perhaps the most provocative aspect of this parable is that, when those “sheep” at the King’s right hand were caring for people who were hungry, thirsty, strangers, naked, sick, or imprisoned – “the least of these” – they did so without recognizing that in so doing they were also caring for the King, the Son of Man. They treated these “least ones” with love and respect and care because – well, because they were acting out of the love and respect and care which resided in their own hearts and souls. For they were living from within that space we call, “The Kingdom of God.”

On the other hand (on the king's **left** hand), the "goats" – who are also shocked to discover that the King, the Son of Man, had appeared to them in the guise of "the least of these" – the goats ask the king, "When did we see you?" I imagine that they were thinking, though they did not speak the words aloud, "If we had **known**, O King, that you were present in those "least" ones, we would have *lavished* care and honor upon you!" The "goats" tend to ingratiate themselves to those who are in power, those who are in a position to return the favor. They care for the "great ones;" *not* the "least of these."

And is that not the way of the "kingdom of this world"? Corporations will *lavish* money upon the political campaigns of those who, if elected, will be in the position to return the favor; and politicians will ingratiate themselves to more powerful politicians who are in the position to return the favor. It's called, "*quid pro quo*," and it is an unwritten, but deep-rooted, *modus operandi* in this world. *This* type of action arises from the self-interest and ego which rule the hearts and lives of those of us (and I am often one of them!) who are rooted in the kingdom of this world and its value systems and mechanisms. The actions of the goats are calculative. But the actions of the sheep – who live under the rule of the kingdom of God and its King, the Son of Man (which recent Bibles translate as "the Human One") – the actions of the sheep are *uncalculated* and indiscriminate, not seeking anything in return.

Jesus began this parable by saying, "When the Son of Man comes in his glory... he will sit on the throne of his glory." Now, I think that most of us envision the "glory" of the Son of Man as coming at the end of the world, the end of time, with all the triumphalist images we find described so vividly in the Book of Revelation. But let me suggest another interpretation, inspired by a famous quote from a 2nd-Century Saint. St. Irenaeus said, "The glory of God is a human being fully alive!" The glory of God is a human being fully *alive*. And what does being "fully alive" mean, if not living our lives from within the Kingdom of God? And so, what if we believe that the Son of Man comes in his glory not just at the end of time, but here and now, in fully-alive human beings? And what if we imagine his *throne* of glory being **within** those same human beings? After all, Jesus told us, "People can't observe the coming of the kingdom of God. They can't say, 'Here it is!' or 'There it is!' You see, the kingdom of God is within you." (Luke 17:20, GW) If the kingdom of God is within us, then the King's glory, and throne of glory, are within us, also.

What today's parable does, I think, is draw our attention to the contrasting motivations behind the actions of the sheep and the actions (or inaction) of the goats; and in so doing, the parable causes **us** to ask ourselves what our *own* motivations are. The *goats* are motivated to do good to the powerful, the prestigious, the "greatest", those who can offer something in return – be it financial gain, affection, approval, security, control, or whatever. The actions (or

inaction) of the goats emanate from their ego selves and the values and systems of the kingdom of **this** world.

And, my friends, I don't need to point out to you what **this** world's values and systems have created: divisiveness, hatred, racism, nationalism, greed, violence, self-righteousness, polarization, selfishness, idolatry, and the **denigration** of those who are hungry, thirsty, strangers, homeless, or imprisoned, along with the *reduction* of social programs to help them. Such is the kingdom of this world in our day and age. The "goats" are rooted and centered in *this* kingdom – and, I confess, I am often among them!

The sheep, on the other hand, are motivated to do good to any and all because *their* actions emanate from hearts centered in the kingdom of God, ruled by the Son of Man, the King, the Human One; and on my *best* days, I am among **them**.

This parable has often been called, "The Parable of the Last Judgment." But I would suggest to you that Jesus does not use this parable to judge or condemn; but rather as a call to transformation of heart and mind and motivation and loyalty. This parable calls us to decide which kingdom – the kingdom of *this* world or the kingdom of God – we choose to make our own, sink our roots into, and draw all our motivation and energy from. This parable calls us to decide who will sit on the throne of our life: the Son of God, the King, the Human One? Or ourself and our own ego?

Today is Stewardship Sunday at Christ Church: a time when we are asked to pledge, for the coming year, a portion of our treasure to support the life and ministry of Christ Church. Why would we do so? I think our parable today provides one possible answer: Where else, in the course of our daily lives, are we reminded, repeatedly and consistently, of the fact that, on any given day, we could be a sheep or a goat, finding our motivation and energy "out there" in the world and its values and systems, or finding our motivation and energy in the kingdom of God within us, where the Son of Man, the King, the Human One calls us into his glory and compassion and eternal life and forgiveness and love for the "least of these"? For some of us, participating in Sunday worship each week is the **only** time we are ever challenged to transform our hearts and minds and motivations and loyalties.

Where else, in the span of *your* week, are you consistently called into the kingdom of God, reminded that it is within you, and challenged to become a human being fully alive – the glory of God?

AMEN