

The Second-Last Sunday of the Church Year – Pr. Faugstad sermon
St. Matthew 25:31-46: “The King of Love My Shepherd Is.”
November 18/19, 2023 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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Holy and righteous God, in mercy You became the Son of Man to be a gracious Judge to us. Grant us to live our life here on earth in true faith and love, and to stand with all Your people at Your right hand on the Day of Your glory. Amen. (*Book of Family Prayer*, p. 35)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the twenty-fifth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

[Jesus said:] “When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. Before Him will be gathered all the nations, and He will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And He will place the sheep on His right, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right, ‘Come, you who 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 drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed Me, I was naked and you clothed Me, I was sick and you visited Me, I was in prison and you came to Me.’ / “Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? And when did we see You a stranger and welcome You, or naked and clothe You? And when did we see You sick or in prison and visit You?’ / “And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these My brothers, you did it to Me.’ / “Then He will say to those on His left, ‘Depart from Me, you cursed, 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 no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome Me, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.’ / “Then they also will answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?’ / “Then He will answer them, saying, ‘Truly, I say to you, 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.” (ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Joh. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who judges us not by the love we have shown others, but by the love He has shown us, dear fellow redeemed:

Are you ready for “Judgment Day”? We can’t help but feel some fear at the thought of it. On that day, Jesus will peel back the barrier between heaven and earth and reveal His glory to all mankind. He will come with a shout, with the sound of a great trumpet, accompanied by the angels. All the works of darkness will be exposed by His holy light. There will be nowhere to hide. Jesus says that *“on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak”* (Mat. 12:36). That is terrifying, because we have filled our life with careless words.

But the way Jesus describes the last judgment in today's reading gives us a different perspective on the day. We are told of a King sitting on His glorious throne, but then He is described as a Shepherd. Those are very different pictures. A king gives orders; he exercises his power. A shepherd dutifully cares for the sheep. Here we see Jesus separating *"people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats."*

For the sheep, He only has sweet things to say. He calls them ones who are *"blessed by My Father."* He says they will *"inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."* Then this Shepherd-King does something remarkable. He starts recounting all the good things the sheep have done for Him! They gave Him food when He was hungry, drink when He was thirsty, a home when He was a stranger, clothing when He was naked, encouragement when He was sick and in prison.

The sheep are dumbfounded, as sheep often are. They ask, "When did we do all these things for You, O Lord? When did we sheep do these things for You, our Shepherd, our King?" And He will reply, *"Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these My brothers, you did it to Me."* This happy exchange is probably not the first thing that comes to our minds when we think of Judgment Day. But it is how Jesus describes it, so it is good for us to dwell on His words and to find comfort in them as the last day approaches.

On the other hand, Jesus does not only speak words of comfort regarding that day. The goats at His left hear a very different message. Jesus does not say, "As long as you tried to be good and do what is right, you can enter My kingdom." Or, "as long as you were sincere in your beliefs and followed your heart, that's all that matters to Me." This is the way the unbelieving world speaks. We hear many people—including professed Christians—say that all religions worship the same god, or that all religions are different paths to get to the same place. This is "Universalism," and Jesus never teaches it.

He makes a much more exclusive claim about Christianity. He says, *"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me"* (Joh. 14:6). Those who deny the Son of God incarnate cannot have the Father. The apostle Peter once told the Jewish religious leaders that in rejecting Jesus, they had rejected *"the cornerstone."* Then he added, *"And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved"* (Act. 4:11,12).

This is why the goats ended up at Jesus' left. They denied Him. They rejected the salvation He won for them. They did not want to hear His Word of truth. They wanted to go their own way. So Jesus will say to them on the last day, *"Depart from Me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels."* He will explain that when He was hungry, they did not feed Him. When He was thirsty, they gave Him no drink, and so on.

In their desperation, the unbelievers will cry out, *"Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?"* Their thinking is that if only they had the chance, they would have helped the King. If they knew of His needs, they would have stepped up. But they miss the point. The point is not that they failed to do enough good works for God to earn their way into heaven.

Doing good works doesn't get anyone into heaven. Ephesians 2 says, "*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast*" (vv. 8-9). If we wanted to get ourselves to heaven by our own works, we would have to live a perfect life in every way. But none of us has even come close! We have broken each of God's Commandments more times than we could count.

This is why the sheep are so surprised to hear their Shepherd-King recount all the good things they had done for Him. We know how much we have sinned and how far we have fallen short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). But the sheep are not those who have always excelled at doing what is right, or who have sinned less than others have. The sheep are believers. Their trust and confidence are not in themselves and what they do, but in Jesus and what He has done.

The opposite is the case for the goats, the unbelievers. They may have been really nice people, but they did not trust in Jesus as their Savior. Because they rejected Him, nothing they did was actually righteous in His sight. That is what Hebrews 11:6 emphasizes, "*without faith it is impossible to please him.*" No matter how much money a person gives to the hungry and the poor, no matter how many strangers they welcome or prisoners they visit, if these are not done as fruits of faith, the Shepherd-King does not count them as being done for Him. It is impossible to please God without faith.

But then it is also the case that *with* faith it is impossible not to please Him. Faith produces good fruit. So when you and I go about our day, serving the people around us, these are good fruits in God's sight. Usually we aren't even aware of the good. We go to work, pick up groceries, clean the house, and pay our bills. We have devotions with our family, and we pray. There is never enough time to get everything done, and we probably feel guilty for not doing more.

But Jesus considers all these little things that barely seem to matter to be great works. He looks at our imperfect and lowly efforts like a parent looks at the scribbled drawings of a little child. In His eyes, the scribbled efforts of our humble lives are beautiful. On the last day, He will put our good deeds on display, like a child's drawing showcased on the kitchen fridge. He counts all the things done for "*the least of these [His] brothers,*" as being done for Him.

We know that He looks at us like this not because we are so good, but because He is so good. Whatever good we accomplish starts with His good. Our love for others starts with His love for us. We learn what it means to serve the least by watching the Son of God humble Himself to serve the world of sinners. The world was happy with His miracles. The sick and demon-possessed were glad to be healed. But most people walked away from Him. Some even conspired to kill Him.

Still He went forward. He lived a perfect life according to the law of God, showing perfect love to God and to His neighbors, a life free from sin. He did not "*repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling*" (1Pe. 3:9). He did what He teaches His followers to do. He loved His enemies. He did good to those who hated Him. He blessed those who cursed Him. He prayed for those who abused Him (Luk. 6:27-28). Then He willingly gave up His life, so that all sin would be atoned for, and sinners would have salvation.

The holy life He lived is the reason you now stand holy in God's sight. When you were brought to faith in Him, your sins were removed from you, and His righteousness was placed over you. This is why you can get ready for Judgment Day without being afraid of what will happen to you. You will not be judged for your careless words or any of your sins, because Jesus paid for them all. And you will not be judged as failing to do enough good, because Jesus' life of good works, His life of perfect righteousness, is credited to you.

The King who will sit on His glorious throne on Judgment Day is a "King of love." He is your Savior. Like a Shepherd, He will gather you and all His sheep safely to His side. Then you will never again hunger, never again thirst, never be left out or go without. You will be with Him, so you will have everything you need. On the last day, you will respond to His love for you like the hymnwriter expresses it:

The King of love my Shepherd is,
Whose goodness faileth never;
I nothing lack if I am His,
And He is mine forever. (*Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary* 370, v. 1)

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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