

Whatever You Did

Matthew 25:31-46

November 19, 2017

First United Methodist Church, Lindstrom

(This is a manuscript prepared for sermon delivery and may not represent actual words spoken.)

“The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’”

So we know the context here. We have been talking about it the past few weeks. In chapter twenty-four Jesus talked about the end of the age and his return. He made it very clear that no one knows when that will be. He doesn't even know. So while we wait, we are to keep watch and be ready. The parable of the ten virgins. While we wait, we are to use the gifts God has given us. We don't sit by idly and do nothing. The parable of the talents. Our text for today details what that day...the end of the age...the return of Jesus...will look like.

We are actually observing Christ the King Sunday a week early. Next week we will be blessed to have Jesse Hanvey with us; he will be our preacher. Christ the King Sunday is the final Sunday in the Church year. The new Church year begins with the first Sunday in Advent. This year that date is December 3. The Church year begins with our anticipating and preparing for the arrival of Jesus. We end the year with our celebrating Jesus as King.

There is this passage in the Old Testament book of Ezekiel. Chapter thirty-four. That chapter is all about shepherd and sheep. In that chapter, God says, “I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so I will look after my sheep. I will rescue them....” Then a bit later in that same chapter, we read, “This is what the Sovereign Lord says to them: ‘See I will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you shove with flank and shoulder, butting all the weak sheep with your horns until you have driven them away, I will save my flock, and they will no longer be plundered....’”

Now the image is this. God is saying that there are sheep. But among the sheep there are some that are bullies. Big, overweight bruiser-type sheep. And these sheep use their size and their horns, and they push and butt all the weaker sheep out of their way. These bully sheep butt their way to the front of the line and leave weaker sheep in their wake.

Hold onto that image.

Chapter twenty-five of Matthew's Gospel contains two parables. What we read today is not like a parable. Jesus offered a description of what it will look like on that day...the end of the age...the day of his return. He used the image of sheep and goats.

Jesus will return as King. When he does return, he will gather all the nations together...you know...to let them know who the King is. He will separate people from one another. He will separate as a shepherd separates sheep from goats. Jesus' original hearers would have gotten that image. Out in the country sheep and goats mingled during the day. In the evening they were often separated. Sheep were more tolerant of cooler temperatures. Goats were herded together for warmth. Jesus used this image to make both a hopeful and ominous point.

The sheep—the ones on the right—are invited into the kingdom. The reason for this invitation is they fed the King when he was hungry; they gave him water when he was thirsty; they welcomed him when he was a stranger; they clothed him when he was naked; they took care of him when he was sick; they visited him when he was in prison.

Well, those on the right wonder when they had done all this. I mean they are probably thinking that they had never seen the King in the

flesh until this moment. The King replies, “When you did it to the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you did it for me.”

Those on the left—the goats—are not given the same invitation. In fact, the King tells them to get out. They did not do any of what the righteous did. They didn’t feed the King or take care of him and all that. Well...they wonder when they had failed to do any of those things. And the King says, “...whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.”

Okay...so let me say this. Yes, I have said this many times. But...we are saved by grace. You know, Ephesians, chapter two and verses eight and nine. “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.”

There are those who complain that this text we are considering today seems to put a lot of emphasis on what we do. The sheep did the right stuff...so they are blessed...they get to enter the kingdom. Looks that way. But I need to emphasize that we become a sheep by grace through faith. And we then follow the shepherd...and all that. We are sheep...not goats.

When I think of goats, I think of Gary Pederson. I may have mentioned him before. Perhaps I am being a bit judgmental. Not a very sheep-like thing for me to be. But I am not afraid to name him and call him out. If any of you know him, you can tell him I said this. Gary was this big senior high guy. Big...strong. Played center on the basketball team. Brooklyn Center Junior and Senior High School. Defensive lineman on the football team. That guy. I was in eighth grade and small and skinny and not quite as buff and toned as I am now.

I can still see this scene as if it happened yesterday. Gary and I occupied the same lunch hour. I was waiting in one of the three lines. The lines were long, but I was almost to the front of my line. Gary walked in. One thing about Gary was waiting in line was beneath him. It was something he did not do. Oh...no. He would just

pick out a spot near the front of one of the lines and go and stand there. He always picked a spot in front of one of the Junior High kids. This particular day he chose to come and stand right in front of me. He said not one word. He did not excuse himself. Just came and stood there...and looked at me as if I should consider myself lucky to have been the fortunate one he chose to stand in front of that day.

“Oh Gary, thank you for choosing me. What did I ever do to receive this honor?” Looking back, I sure wish I would have said that. You know what I really said? I looked at the folks behind me...who were also among the fortunate to have been cut in front of...and I said...not one thing. I did not utter one word of thanks or protest. I might have been just a small, skinny, weak eighth grader. But I was no fool. Had I said anything, Gary might have had me for lunch. Gary Pederson.

You know this world is full of people who, for some reason, think they do not have to wait in line. They can just butt their way to the front. They don’t care who they step on. Just move the weak ones out of the way. Goats. Goats head butt their way around. You know what I am saying.

We are not goats. We are sheep. Let’s own our sheepness.

Let me tell you something about Jesus...Jesus our King. You know this, too. But I’ll remind us of it. Jesus, our King, was equal with God. Equal with God. But he did not take advantage of that equality. Instead, he emptied himself. He took on the form of a servant. He became a servant. He served us. He washed feet. He was obedient...obedient to the point of death...death on a cross. He is our King. Let me see if we remember: No king but...King Jesus. King Jesus...not a herder of goats... but a shepherd of sheep.

So how do we serve our King? That is an easy question there.

One final reminder here...at least for awhile. Two weeks ago we discussed Jesus’ answer to the question about the greatest

commandment. Jesus, in his answer, said the greatest commandment consisted of two parts. We love God. We love one another. The two cannot be separated. If I say I love God but then do not love my brother or sister, I am a liar. Simple as that. I need to take responsibility for that. When I love my brother or sister, I also am loving God.

So...we serve our King by serving others...serving those who are seen as the least. We do not butt our way to the front of any line. We go to the end...if necessary. We stop along the way. We serve. We give a meal to a hungry person. We give a drink of water to a thirsty person. We visit a sick person. All that. When we do that, Jesus said we are doing it to him. (By the way, just an aside...a big aside...that is how closely our shepherd King identifies with his sheep-like subjects. What's done or not done to those in need is done or not done to him.) Anyway, we serve our King by loving and serving others.

One last thing here. Kings and queens and other ruler types...prime ministers and presidents and all...these folks are just difficult to get close to. Try and get close to a king...uninvited...or the President. You will be taken down and handcuffed and led away first...and asked for an explanation later.

Jesus took on skin and got close to us. How close? He became just like us. That close. He sits on a throne now. But we can get close...so close. In this sanctuary there are many who could testify to this truth. There are those here who have rubbed elbows with the poor and served a meal. Those here who have gone into a prison and shared a little grace. Those here who have worked on the repair of a home for someone who could not do or afford such repairs. Those here who, without anyone else knowing, have helped someone. So many stories. And just about every person will say that somehow in that serving they experienced the presence of Jesus. They saw and rubbed elbows with Jesus. I know this is true.

You want to see and experience Jesus our King? No need to look up. Just take a look around. He's there. He's here.

"The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'"