

While We Wait  
Matthew 25:31-46  
November 20, 2011

“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.

Dear Friends In Christ,

On this last Sunday of the Church Year we have the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats. On the surface, it seems simple enough: It is a parable of the Final Judgment, when the righteous are delivered to heaven and the unrighteous are condemned to hell. There is one strange thing, however: It seems that the righteous get into heaven for helping the underprivileged, while the unrighteous are condemned for their failure to do the same; but that would mean that we are saved by our works, not by faith. No, there's something more going on here.

When we encounter a difficult text in God's Word, we know what to do: We see if other portions of the Scriptures can help us out. And that's why our sermon today begins in Matthew, chapter 10.

In Matthew 10, Jesus is sending out the disciples to preach to Israel that the kingdom of heaven is near; and as they proclaim His Word, they will also heal the sick, cleanse lepers, raise the dead and cast out demons.

Before the disciples depart, Jesus tells them, "Provide neither gold nor silver nor copper in your money belts, nor bag for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor staffs; for a worker is worthy of his food" (Mt. 10:9-10). So, how are they going to eat? How will they replace worn clothing? How will they find shelter? Well, they will be taken care of: Some of those who hear them preach about Jesus will believe what they preach; and because they believe, they will respond by caring for the disciples with food, clothing, shelter and all sorts of help. Of course, many will not believe; and because they do not believe, they will not see any reason for kindness toward the disciples. Believing that the disciples preach nonsense, they will use their resources elsewhere.

So Jesus is sending out His disciples to preach the Gospel, and the disciples will carry no supplies. They may get hungry and thirsty along the way, and their clothes and sandals may wear out. Jesus even warns them that they may be arrested and imprisoned for preaching the Gospel; and, in the weakness from hunger and thirst, they may grow sick. Who will take care of them? Those who believe the Gospel that they preach. Believers will feed them, give them water, care for them in sickness, visit them in prison if need be. They will do so in response to being forgiven, in thankfulness as they await the Lord's Second Coming and eternal life. On the other hand, many will reject the Gospel and the disciples who preach it. What will happen to them? Jesus declares in Matthew 10, "It will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city" (10:15). At the Final Judgment, they will face a sentence that makes fire and brimstone look like a cake-walk.

We should note two more things from Matthew 10, as Jesus concludes His instructions to the disciples. He tells them, "He who receives you receives Me" (10:40). They are His

representatives, proclaiming His Word. To receive them is to receive Him. To care for them is to care for Him. To reject them is to reject Him, because they proclaim His Word.

And finally, Jesus' final instruction: "And whoever gives one of these little ones only a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple, assuredly, I say to you, he shall by no means lose his reward" (10:42). Jesus praises those who will give water to his disciples because they are His representatives; and in that praise, He calls His disciples "little ones." They are not little children; but as servants of the Servant, they are among the least of all.

So, one more recap of Matthew 10:

\* Jesus calls the disciples "little ones;" these brothers (Mt. 12:49-50) of His are among the least.

\* Those who believe the Word will care for them. Those who do not believe will not.

\* When people receive the disciples on the basis of the Word they preach, they receive Jesus. When they reject the disciples, they reject Jesus.

\* Believers have the joyful hope of eternity in heaven; unbelievers face an eternity worse than Sodom and Gomorrah.

We have spent quite a bit of this sermon speaking of Matthew 10, but today's Gospel lesson is Matthew 25:31-46. There is a reason for this: I think that Matthew 10 is the best commentary you will find to explain the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats.

In this parable, all people are gathered for the Final Judgment, and the believers are separated from the unbelievers. The believers enter into the kingdom of heaven and eternal life; the unbelievers depart into everlasting fire—a judgment far worse than the momentary fire and brimstone that rained down on Sodom and Gomorrah.

What is the measure by which they are judged? They are measured by their treatment of the "least of these." To the believing sheep, Jesus says: "I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me." (Matt. 25:35-36) When the sheep express confusion as to when they did this, He responds, "Assuredly I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me."

He then condemns the unbelieving goats for their failure to do the same. When they object, He says to them, "Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me."

Recall once again, Jesus' words from Matthew 10: Just before He calls His disciples "little ones," He tells them, "He who receives you receives Me" (10:40). In this parable, He tells the sheep, "inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me."

What is my point? I think we must seriously consider the question, "What is this parable about? What is it not about?"

This parable does not teach that the sheep save themselves by feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, or visiting the sick or imprisoned. We know this already, of course; for if believers are

saved by feeding the hungry and visiting the sick, then they are saved by our works-not by the death of Jesus. However, this is often how this parable is interpreted: Help the one in need and go to heaven; ignore them and you'll be condemned. This is the popular application of our time: The teaching that the Gospel is all about helping the underprivileged, and not at all about forgiveness and eternal life.

We must be clear what else this parable does not teach. This parable does not teach that believers are saved by how well they treat the apostles-or pastors who continue the apostolic ministry. While this might appeal to some ministers out there, this too is condemned by all of Scripture. If believers are saved by making sure that the pastor is fed, then they are saved by their works-not by the death of our Lord.

So, what does this parable teach? It teaches that people are saved because they believe the Word. Really. It goes like this: Jesus sends forth His apostles as His representatives who deliver His message-they preach His Word. Those who hear the Word and do not reject it, receive it. Those who receive the Word are saved-not by **their** work, but by the work of the Holy Spirit. When they receive the spoken Word, they receive Christ, who told His disciples, "He who receives you receives Me." In response to that, they receive the one whom He has sent and care for him. In the case of the New Testament Church, it is the believers who feed, clothe, visit and care for the apostles who proclaim the Gospel; and they do so out of thanksgiving for the Gospel, so that it might be proclaimed to the nations. In short, believers support the mission of the Church; unbelievers do not.

The sheep, the believers, are saved because they believe the Word. Believing the Word, they want it to continue to be proclaimed to all nations. This desire will lead to deeds, and they will take care of those whom Jesus calls and sends to do the public proclaiming.

Again, we should emphasize that this parable is not meant to elevate pastors as somehow superior to others. If anything, it is a reminder to pastors of their solemn responsibility to declare only the truth of Jesus to you. Rather, it's an observation of how the Church works: Christians who believe the Word care for those who proclaim it; they are saved by their faith, and the care they give is a fruit of it. Those who do not believe the Word do not support those who proclaim it-do you support things that you don't believe in? They are condemned; not because they do not support, but because they did not believe.

Let us apply this parable to our present day: First there is this plain truth: Judgment Day is coming. As Jesus announces in this parable, He will return in glory to judge all nations, to deliver believers to heaven and unbelievers to hell. Judgment Day is coming, but rejoice! You have nothing to fear. Consider for a moment, Who it is who sits on that throne on the Last Day; It is Christ, your Savior. You will want no one else seated there to do the judging.

For one thing, He has not always sat in heaven, waiting for judgment. Indeed, He has done much to prepare you for a favorable judgment. At times, He was hungry, as when He was tempted in the wilderness and remained righteous for you. At times He was thirsty, as when He suffered on the cross. At times, He was a stranger, as when his hometown rejected Him and sought to kill Him. At times, He was naked, for the soldiers stripped Him bare before they drove the nails into His hands and feet. He, too, was sick-for He bore your sickness and infirmity to the cross. And though He was not imprisoned, He was in the brutal custody of Roman guards who scourged Him before His death. As He suffered these various torments, who was there to help Him? No one, but there is reason for this: He did not undergo such agonies so that we might do

something for Him. He suffered them to do something for us: To present Himself as a holy sacrifice, to deliver you from sin. Oh, the Judge has suffered much to prepare you for Judgment Day.

As well as His suffering, consider His death: You were under the sentence of death-everlasting death-for your undeniable sins against Him. But mark the practice of this Judge: He suffers the sentence of death for you-in your place. Do you know of any judge who serves out the sentence of the guilty who stand before Him? There is only one-and He has suffered execution in your place.

The Lord of this parable is often pictured as a remorseless hammer of righteousness, no excuses. But could you imagine a more compassionate Judge to sit on that throne on the Last Day? This Judge declares, "You deserve a death sentence -- an eternal death sentence -- for your trespasses and sins. But, so that I would not have to condemn you, I sentenced Me to your death. I declare you not-guilty, because your guilt has been suffered already." It is little wonder how, by faith, we are moved to support this proclamation.

Friends, what cause for joy as we anticipate Judgment Day: The Judge has arranged the trial so that you are innocent. There is only one way that you can still be condemned: You can insist on being condemned anyway. This is the curse of unbelief, for the unbeliever says "I do not believe that I have done anything wrong; or else I don't believe the Judge has died for me, so I don't want the pardon He offers." It is a frightening demonstration of the blindness of sin, that so many cling to the one way to be lost.

Rejoice: As you anticipate Judgment Day, you already know the verdict. The Judge says, "You are not guilty," and He most certainly is the supreme court Justice; there is no one who can overturn that verdict.

This is your joy and certain hope; therefore, as you wait for His coming, you are set free in thankfulness to do good works, according to your vocation. Whether or not the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats applies to all in need around us, serving our neighbor is certainly what Christians are set free to do. In the vocations of father and mother, parents care for those who are hungry, thirsty and sometimes sick. In the vocation of child, adult children may find themselves doing the same for aging parents. In the vocation of friend, people help one another in need. As a neighbor and citizen, there is always opportunity to assist the poor, the helpless, the unemployed and downtrodden. You are set free to do these things because the Lord has served you with such compassion. You do not do these things to become a believer, of course; you do these things **because** you believe, **because** you have heard the Word. And the Word leads to the deeds.

It is not inappropriate to speak of another vocation or calling, that of church member. Even as those early believers cared for those who declared the Word, so you also have opportunity to support the proclamation of the Gospel. You have the opportunity to give offerings so that the Church is heated and the lights are on, so that people might gather in comfort to hear the Word. And honestly, such offerings go to pay pastors, as well. You give such offerings in thankfulness to Christ. Please note: He declares, "As you did it to the least of these, you did it unto Me." Offerings to the Church are an acknowledgment that Christ is present here in the Word that is proclaimed. The offering is made to the Lord, so that His Word might continue to be heard. Therefore, each Christian is set free to give such support as he is able, and in proportion as that ability changes.

Again, such offerings will not earn your salvation. They do not have to, because you are already saved. They are given in gratitude, and they are part of God's plan: They are dedicated to the proclamation of the Gospel, so that others will hear and be saved.

What a message we find in the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats! There is the warning that Judgment Day is coming. But for you, there is no fear. Yours is not a life of terror in the meantime; instead, it is one of joyful service and grateful obedience to Him. This is because you already know the outcome of the Final Judgment for you. The Judge who sits upon the throne declares, "I have suffered your sentence for you. The price has been paid. You are not guilty - because you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Amen.