

Sermon – Matthew 25:31-46
David R. Lyle
Grace Lutheran Church
Christ the King – Year A
26 November 2023

“When Was It?”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. It’s an odd thing to be evaluated and sorted out, especially by your peers. But that’s what happened twice a day on the fields of Franklin Elementary School as the kids got picked, one after the other, for sides of two-hand-touch football. The sorting would go on until we got to the least of these, those kids in whom the captains had little confidence. I tended more toward the middle of the pack, though certainly my draft stock could rise or fall based on some small success on the field or some accidental social transgression off it. We learn through such experiences that life will continue to sort us, into or out of clubs, schools, jobs, relationships. And much to my dismay, never once has this sorting resulted in my hearing a cry of “Gryffindor!” or “Ravenclaw!” Oh, who am I kidding. I’m probably a Hufflepuff, and that’s okay. But I digress. One of the ways we often seek to better sort ourselves is by keeping a safe distance from those we call the least.
2. I did not particularly enjoy the daily ritual of being sorted onto this or that football team in elementary school, but it paled in comparison to the once-and-for-all finality of the Great Judgment in today’s parable. The Son of Man – Jesus in his apocalyptic glory – will one day return. All nations shall be gathered before his throne; there is no escape. A great sorting will happen, sheep sent to the right hand and into heavenly glory, the goats to the left, into eternal punishment. And how will such sorting be determined? By how well

you treat the least of these – the hungry and thirsty, the stranger and naked, the sick and imprisoned. If you cared for these, the Son of Man will bless you. If not, well, too late now!

3. It is tempting to take my chances on such a great sorting. After all, I'm a pretty good guy. Some of you sinners look way more goatish than I do! Perhaps I'll make the cut! Such mental gymnastics, however, defy reality, because Jesus' teaching here demands that we look at ourselves as honestly as does the Judge. We are mixed bags, at best. While I have done some sheepy good deeds, how many more times have I turned a blind eye? How often have I failed to care for a fellow person and, in so doing, denied not only help to others but the chance to see Jesus – for does not Jesus say he is to be found in the needs of others? Have we any hope?
4. By this point in Matthew's narrative, Jesus is moving headlong toward the cross. The death he does not deserve is just around the corner. This teaching, this parable, is meant to bring us along with him to Calvary. Jesus holds this mirror up for us and we see, just days before he dies, the deep truth about ourselves. That whatever good we have managed to do along the way, whatever good we've utterly failed to do, we are not the people we were created to be. If we were, would there still be so much hunger, so many people estranged, so much mass incarceration? On our own, we are a long line of goats. And there, with Jesus, we die. But Jesus, in his dying and rising, brings us to himself. For he is not only Judge but Shepherd – the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. Driven to the cross, we are raised anew as goats turned into sheep by the blood of the Lamb. On the other side of the grave, we see the Kingdom stretching out into eternity, ruled over by Christ the King, whose glory is always cruciform, whose power is always self-giving, whose love is present for us now. When it comes to our salvation, it has already been worked out for us. Jesus has already saved us. We don't need to prove it by our works. Just believe.

5. Let us not imagine that Jesus isn't also entirely serious about where to find him now. While we sort ourselves away from the least among us, Jesus locates himself precisely there. In fact, since that's where Christ chooses to be, perhaps such people aren't "the least" at all. They may have particular needs, but they are not less than us. And of course, sometimes we *are* them. But we are all loved by Jesus, who comes for all peoples and all nations. Embraced by this love and driven by faith, not fear, we can better enact the Kingdom which will one day come, a Kingdom in which no one is hungry or thirsty, stranger or naked, sick or imprisoned. Carla Works of Wesley Seminary writes that Jesus' "teaching on the final judgment challenges every disciple of Jesus to be a harbinger of God's kingdom in a broken world." Having glimpsed the coming Kingdom, we can't just go back to how life used to be. Stanley Hauerwas writes, "The difference between followers of Jesus and those who do not know Jesus is that those who have seen Jesus no longer have any excuse to avoid 'the least of these.'" To which I say amen, so long as such injunctions do not draw us out of God's grace and back to imagining that it's up to us to be good enough and do enough good.

6. That's why there's no better sermon illustration than a Baptism. Into our midst today comes Oliver. He's probably caused his mom and dad a bit of trouble in his almost two years, but hardly anything worthy of a lefthanded judgment. And he's no doubt brought immense joy, but It's not like I've seen him volunteering at the local food pantry. He hasn't earned a thing and doesn't even know enough to ask for it. And yet here, in just a moment, we'll see the King of all creation stoop low and claim Oliver for his own, forever. I trust and pray that Oliver will lead a life in which serving others takes central place. But I know that, no matter what, Oliver belongs to Jesus, and Jesus will never let him go. So it is for you, you erstwhile goats. By grace, with faith, you have nothing to fear. You are sheep forever, and that's not *baaad* at all. You are sheep, and by God's grace you can even begin to act like it. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.