

Sermon – Matthew 25:31-46
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Grace Lutheran Church
New Year's Eve – Year B
31 December 2023

“Making a List, Checking it Twice”

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

1. In *Noelle*, a Christmas movie released direct-to-streaming shortly before the pandemic, we learn that there is a crisis of succession at the North Pole. The new Santa Claus doesn't want to be the new Santa Claus, so he runs away to Phoenix to find himself and practice yoga. Holiday hijinks ensue, all of course culminating with an ending overflowing with yuletide cheer. But an interesting thing happens when the elves are without a Santa; they don't have the list, so they have to determine for themselves who's been naughty and who's been nice. Without Santa's magic, an elf named Gabe develops a very twenty-first century solution: an algorithm. Based on such important ethical matters such as flossing teeth and eating vegetables, he winnows the children of the world onto one or another list. But when looked at with such clarity, and absent Christmas charity, the scales tip against most children. In fact, by the time Gabe is done, only 2,837 children throughout the world are deemed nice, much to the horror of his fellow elves. Santa returns in time to set things right, but the film makes an interesting point: if people are judged purely on what they have done, are there really that many nice ones to be found?
2. While the world gathers in merriment tonight, you have chosen to come here first, to be confronted as you are each year by this passage from Matthew in which the return of Jesus in all his glory to judge the world is foretold. All

- people, from all nations, shall be brought before the judgment throne to be sorted out as nice or naughty, as sheep or goats. The basis for the judgment is clear. Have you fed the hungry, given drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, cared for the sick, visited the imprisoned? If so, well and good! So have you done unto Jesus, so shall you be welcomed into the Kingdom. If not, well too bad for you. Just as you failed to show kindness to those in need, so have you failed Jesus. Off to eternal punishment with you, where the coals are not cooled in your stockings, but burning hot as hellfire.
3. So, are you a sheep or a goat? It's easy enough to make a case for ourselves. Most of us are better than some others. Maybe we've been good enough to be nice little sheep! But dislike it as we might, Jesus demands that we be honest with ourselves, for we cannot hide the truth from him. I was reminded just this morning of how little we like to acknowledge sin. Erika and the kids had arrived just a minute late for worship today, and so were waiting in the narthex until the entrance hymn. I looked over at them during the confession of sins and there they were, my two boys, not confessing their sins but wrestling with one another. Why confess sin when you can just keep sinning? But confess our sin or not, it is there. Can any among us honestly say we have always lived up to Christ's standard? I fear not even 2,837 could be found for the sheepfold. It's a long line of goats, as far as the eye can see, including you and me. Sure, we've all, I think, obeyed the letter of the Fifth Commandment, for example: You shall not kill. But Jesus comes not so see if we've achieved the bare minimum but to tighten the screws. Martin Luther knew this well. In his Small Catechism he writes, "We are to fear and love God, so that we neither endanger nor harm the lives of our neighbors, but instead help and support them in all of life's needs." You may not have committed murder, but have you done all you can to help your neighbor in all their needs?
 4. Jesus here closes out his public ministry, and he does so by closing the trap of the Law around us. There is nothing to be done. We are too far gone. But he is

not yet done. Not long after he shows forth the judgment that could come, he instead takes the judgment upon himself. He suffers the very real sin of this world in his passion and death. The world seeks to evict its judge and king. But Jesus the Lamb once slain will not long remain within the stony grave. He is risen and, like the graveclothes, our sin remains in the tomb, left behind forever. Whatever judgment was needed been set aside. We, goat-ish as we may be, are made sheep for the sake of the Lamb, forever under the care of the Good Shepherd. The last word now is not judgment, but newness of life, the unfolding revelation to John in which we see God wiping away tears casting out death forever. The nice list may not be that long, but God does not finally determine our fate on the basis of our goodness. God looks at us, sees Christ cover us with his righteousness, and welcomes us into the party.

5. As you enter the New Year, consider how to more fully live as the sheep God has made you to be. Christ has judged you with mercy and love. Let mercy and love guide your living. Not because you still need to measure up, but in thanksgiving to the God of new life and as signs of that new life breaking into this old world, even now. Luther writes, “we are not to do these things simply because of the commandment and of the threat of judgment, but for the sake of the example of the excellent and great goodness God has shown. For this example cannot be without blessed results, as God’s work of redemption is not without power and good fruit.” So this year, Grace, let us feed the hungry and give drink to the thirsty. Let us welcome the stranger and clothe the naked. Let us care for the sick and visit those imprisoned. Let us do so not to be good enough, but because God is enough. Not to be simply nice, but to bear witness to the God of mercy. Not because God needs our good works, but because our neighbors do. Trust that just as Jesus is truly present for you in the feast of bread and wine tonight, he is also truly present in the needs of our neighbors. Hear the commandments as God gave them, not first as standards to which you must measure up but as invitations to live together as the beloved community. God has made room for you in the pages of the

Book of Life, from which your name cannot be removed. So, sheep of the Good Shepherd, leave the bad behind and enter the new year in the joy of Jesus Christ. In his name go into the world, which still so needs the joyful mercy and lovingkindness of our God. Amen.

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