

Sermon – Matthew 25:21-46
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Grace Lutheran Church
New Year's Eve – Year C
31 December 2024

“Same Old, Same New”

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. Here at the close of the year, I confess I had high hopes for myself. Or at least modest hopes. But then life comes along and reminds me that maybe I'm not so different, so new and improved, after all. For fifteen years of parenthood, we have held the line against getting a video game system. The only one we had was the Nintendo 64 I bought to keep me company when I was on my pastoral internship, 24 years ago. The kids would ask, and we would say no. But the youngest finally broke us. No, we told him, we would not buy him one for Christmas. No, neither would Santa. But, and here we thought we had him, if he wanted to spend his own money, he now had our permission. And so, a new Xbox arrived shortly after Christmas, leaving me with the task of figuring out how to set it up. Setting up new phones, or wireless thermostats, changing the clock in my car? Technology is not my strong suit, to say the least. But this time would be different, at least in how I interacted with the moment. This time, I would stay calm. This time, I would not lose my patience when things inevitably went wrong. This is the point in the movie trailer when Morgan Freeman's voiceover would begin: *But Pastor Lyle did not remain patient.* After failing multiple times, reaching multiple dead ends on internet searches, dealing with customer service AI that was more artificial than intelligent, and finally getting a real human on the phone only to get disconnected, I lost it. Just a little bit. Words were muttered. Cries uttered. Existential voids screamed into. And then Erika came downstairs, did one

- simple thing that I promise you I had already tried seventeen times, and instantly got it to work. Because of course she did. And there I was, reminded that for all my best intentions, sometimes I don't improve at all.
2. The handy thing about Lutheran anthropology is that it's so accurate. No, we are not hard-bitten Calvinists, convinced that everyone is awful all the time. Neither are we the sunny self-help group, convinced that with a little pluck and a side of gumption we can make everything alright. We are honest, calling things – including ourselves – what they are. And we humans a bit of a mess. Yes, we can see, name, and create beauty, truth, and goodness. And we can turn around and ruin it in a heartbeat. We are, to use the classical formulation, *simul iustus et peccator*, simultaneously sinner and saint. But before we are both, we are sinners, and so, in ourselves, we remain.
 3. Perhaps that why the church, in its wisdom, always reads this great parable of judgment from Matthew 25 at the close of the year. When the King finally comes in his glory, all people shall be called to account, sheep and goat separated forever. Some into eternal joy, others into eternal punishment. Sheep and goats shall both be surprised, for when was it that they cared for the hungry and thirsty, the stranger and naked, the sick and imprisoned? And when was it that they had failed to do so? And how were they to know that in doing or not doing these things, there were doing or not doing them to Jesus? The temptation here is to cast sidelong glances at our neighbors, find a way to believe we're a bit better than them, and call it a day. Surely, we're sheep, right? We can't be that *baaaaaaad*. But here in Jesus' final parable before his Passion, he is not mincing words but laying the final trap of the Law. For we will not be judged based upon all the times we have fed the hungry and welcomed the stranger, but for all the times we have failed to do so. And we have all failed to do so. Sure, some more than others, but all. And here, as the hateful trap closes around Jesus, so does his trap of love and life ensnare us.

4. Not long after speaking these words, Jesus, the Lamb of God, the great Shepherd of the sheep, will be put to death. In doing so, he moves to the front of the judgment line. And, in grace, takes upon himself the judgement of everyone behind him in line. And those in front of him, too. Yes, we are goats, pretend otherwise as we might. But that is simply not the end of the story. For the sake of the Lamb, the goats are now sheep, led and fed by the Shepherd who will never give them up, instead giving up himself for them. For you. Forever. Sinners, yes, but now saints, too. Fully forgiven by God.

5. Here on this last night of the year, I find myself in another *simul*, another both/and instead of an either/or. In so many ways I am, to be perfectly honest with you, not hopeful about the coming year. Never mind the fact that I will continue to be who am I, in spite of my best efforts. As in the mirror, so through the window. The world around gives plenty of cause for despair. Yet God invites us to live in hope, too. Hope that springs not from our own doing nor is crushed by our failing. Hope that is undaunted because it flows from Christ the Lamb, Jesus, the I AM. One day, someday, John tells us, there will be a new heaven and a new earth. The sinner we are shall be no more. Tears wiped away, death undone. God will take the beautiful, messy world and make it new. All things new. Even you. Even you. So, beloved goats, as you enter the New Year, may you be blessed. May you do just a little better than last year. May you live boldly, faithfully, as the world rages around you. And come what may, may you know that you are forever part of God's flock, loved by the Shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine for the one, the Shepherd who lays down his life for his friends, the Shepherd who will never let you go. Merry Christmas, friends, and happy New Year. Amen.

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