Sermon – Matthew 25:31-46
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Christ the King – Year A
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"Misreading the Results"

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

1. A few weeks ago, I had to have lab work done. I had my blood drawn for the tests, which would be interpreted later at a follow-up appointment with my primary care physician. But something happened between those two steps, between the blood being drawn and the meeting with the person who is actually qualified to interpret them: the test results popped up in my online chart. So, on the morning of my appointment, I took a look. For the most part, everything seemed normal. But there was one item in particular where I was outside the normal range. Being the curious lad that I am, I did some googling. It quickly became clear to me, based on two minutes of internet research and no medical training, that I clearly had any number of incredibly serious diseases and should probably get my affairs in order. With the sort of fear and trembling that would make a Danish philosopher proud, I drove to meet with my doctor. I was shocked he didn't bring up my dire state of affairs right away, so I asked him. He scrolled through the chart, came to the result in question, and said, "David, you are fine." But I protested, certainly not! He smiled the knowing smile of a man who'd had many a patient before me spend time on WebMD and reiterated the point: "You're fine." He made clear that, while the test results were true and accurate, they did not mean what I thought they meant.

2. In today's parable, the last of the three great parables of judgment and the final piece of Jesus's public ministry, we are put to the test. What will be the result? We are shown a vision of the final judgment, the Son of Man seated on his throne. All people, all nations, shall be brought forward in judgment. The sheep and the goats will be separated, finally and forever. On what basis? On how they – we – treated the least of these. On a first read, I gotta say I feel pretty good about my chances. Feeding the hungry? Welcoming strangers? Visiting the sick and those in prison? I've done those things, and I don't feel sheepish saying so. And when I compare myself to others – when I look out at all of you, you old goats – I like my chances. I'm not doing too *baaaaaadly* at all. But then the test results come back. And what becomes very clear is that, regardless of all the times I have cared for the least of these in our midst, there have been so many more times when I have clearly failed to do so. If this was about meeting a certain basic minimum sure; but this is all-in or all-out, sheep or goat. And while I do a pretty good job of ignoring them most of the time, there is no denying my goatish tendencies. Or yours, for that matter. There is no one in the room who would be waved to the right-hand side. Because we're all evil and awful? No. But we are not who God made us to be, and we have not lived and loved as God has called us to do. We are sinners who have fallen short.

3. On Friday, Greta and I kicked off the Christmas season (and yes, I know it's not even Advent yet) by taking in *A Christmas Carol* at the Goodman Theatre. If you're looking for a reason to see this show, Grace Lutheran's own Austin Hartung is in it, and he's fantastic. You know the story, of course, of Scrooge's transformation from humbug to joy. It begins with a visit from his old business partner, seven years gone, Jacob Marley. Marley, it seems, has not done nearly as well in the afterlife as he had in life. He is bound in chains and comes to warn Ebenezer of the fate that awaits. Who made the chains? The Ghost of Marley speaks: "I wear the chain I forged in life. I made it link by link, and yard by yard; I girded it on of my own free will, and of my own free

will I wore it. Is its pattern strange to you?" While we are pretty good at ignoring it, the pattern is clear enough. We may not be Scrooge or Marley, but the truth is clear, link by link. We simply have not done all we could for the sake of our neighbors; for the lost and the least; for the strangers in our midst; for those who suffer. We are, as we confess on a regular basis, in bondage and cannot free ourselves. We are chained. Is there no hope? Does this lock not have a key?

4. The clear result of this parable's test is that we are all goats. We know this to be true because we live in a world in which there are still those who are least. So, off to eternal punishment, are we? Left to our own devices, yes. But we are not left to our own devices. Here, today, with the clock on his own life running out, Jesus closes the trap on ours. We are lost. But if you keep reading, Jesus will shortly say that he will soon be handed over to be crucified. The righteous judge will become the judged. The Son of Man will stand in the dock on our behalf. The Good Shepherd will become the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And for his sake, we goats will become sheep. Jesus, the Passover lamb without sin, will cut to the front of the line of the goats and submit himself on our behalf. Because, as it turns out, God never wanted to punish us at all, but would rather gather us in. Do you hear your Shepherd's voice? He knows you, and calls you into a new line, the unending line of the saints in light, clothed in the wooly righteousness of Christ

5. The test results are correct. We are, on our own, dead in our sin. We are chained. But our physician, our healer, is much better equipped to read the results that we are. The Good Shepherd has the key for our chains. For the sake of Christ, you have been clothed with the righteousness of Christ. You are forgiven. You, in the words of my doctor, are fine. In fact, you are more than fine. You are loved, you are forgiven, and you are in the sheepfold forever. And, by the way, when those tests results really are concerning,

when our health does falter and fail, the Shepherd will be faithful and will gently lead you home.

6. There's more, of course. Jesus means what he says. You are to look for Jesus. You will find him here, in a moment, in the Passover meal of the Lamb. You will find him, too, in the needs of those in need. So, go. Feed the hungry. Give drink to the thirsty. Clothe the naked. Welcome the stranger and care for the sick. Visit those in any sort of prison. In doing so, you anticipate the Kingdom that our King will soon inaugurate. But you need not do so from fear. *You are free*. The test results are clear, but they don't mean what you thought they might. Sin demonstrates God's desire and will to forgive. Death becomes the gateway to life, eternal and abundant. Drop your chains and get in line. You, sinners, are sinners no longer. You, goats, are sheep. Let go of the *baaaaaad* and get in on the good. The Son of Man who was crucified has been raised. He is your King, your Shepherd, your Lamb. He is yours and you are his. Follow him and all will be well. Amen.

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