

“When Did We See You?”

Valley Presbyterian Church – November 26, 2017

Christ the King/Reign of Christ

Ezekiel 34:11-16

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Matthew 25:31-46

The Prophet Ezekiel offers us a vision of the good shepherd as the one who will care for his sheep by seeking them out and feeding them – offering them good land and ample food; then the lost will be found, the weak will be strengthened, and the sick will be healed. For those who have preyed on others the good shepherd will feed them with justice; which is the other side of caring’s coin.

Christians throughout the world participate in food and clothing drives, mission trips and visitations. We devote a lot of our time and resources to help feed the hungry, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger and heal the sick; caring for our community and our neighbors hidden and in plain sight; close by and far away.

But our New Testament passage, the sorting of the sheep from the goats, introduces a word that is uncomfortable to most of us in the church today: judgement. Maybe this is because religion and judgement have been so unhappily married for so long: Jesus has a lot to say about our judging one another; offering warnings about excluding people because they are sinners. The idea of judgement offends our sense of freedom and contrasts with our belief that a God of unconditional love could judge so harshly and permanently.

Freedom means that we are given the choice of whether to participate in the community or not. This gets to the heart of what the goats in the story did: nothing. They were not sinners in the conventional sense of doing bad things. They just didn’t do anything when they saw their sisters and brothers suffering.

So, the sheep and the goats are sorted not according to what they profess to believe, nor how well they understood that God could be seen in the face of the poor and needy, but instead based on what they chose to do. The ones being judged in this vision are not specifically Jews or Christians, but “the nations;” seemingly, the gentiles who surrounded the followers of Jesus. The question that Jesus seems to address here is not about the ethical standing of individual church members, but how participants in broader societies respond to “the least of these.” What will God do

with those who choose either to persecute – by action or inaction – or, on the other hand, feed, visit, clothe and heal?

If you were a member of the early church, typically poor and often persecuted, there is great comfort to be found here; knowing that God has your back and will judge the powerful who either help or harm you. God will remember favorably those who show kindness, mercy and love – even if they were thought to be your enemies. Judgment may be God’s job, but it’s everyone’s business; each person in every nation is either a sheep or a goat.

Sorting has always been a part of human experience. Before there were nations, there were tribes with different languages, cultural practices and roles within the group; there is a place for everyone. In reading these visions from Ezekiel and Matthew, I can’t help but think of *Harry Potter* and the famed sorting hat. “Gryffindor!” “Hufflepuff!” “Ravenclaw!” And, of course, the sinister “Slytherin!” A house for everyone and everyone in their place. Such clarity seems to make life neater, more manageable. There is no need to really get to know the individual because we all know what those people – like Slytherin people, for example – are like; don’t we?

Jesus talks a lot about sorting in the gospels: he refers to good fruit and bad fruit, good fish and bad fish, wheat and weeds, all meant to be sorted. At some point in time, it seems, all things will be revealed, and God will make clear who is on one side and who is on the other.

But while we impose and enforce many different categories: welcomed and excluded; worthy and unworthy; lower, middle and upper-class; citizen, migrant, refugee and undocumented, God’s categories are limited to just two: those who fed, clothed, cared, and visited; and those who did not. God apparently sees and will care for us depending on how we saw and cared for others.¹

On this final day of the Christian liturgical year, we are called to acknowledge the reign of Christ as King – the one who will, one day, do the sorting. On judgement day, it appears, salvation will not automatically come to those who have or profess faith, but rather to those who do faith; who look at their neighbors – especially those that are in need – and see Christ.

In what we do as individual Christians, and as the church body, do we see the image of God in the poor and needy people of the world? As James Forbes, former

¹ Kathryn Matthews, “Weekly Seeds”

pastor at Riverside Church in New York City, once said: “nobody gets to heaven without a letter of reference from the poor.”²

To follow Jesus means to care for the vulnerable. He says that our judgment in the next life will be based on how we treat “the least of these” in this life. We know that not all poverty or suffering is accidental; some is structural, some situational, and some is based on societal forces and policies. Some people are poor or destitute because of their own bad choices; while some people suffer because of the choices other people have made.

Gary Anderson notes that Christian care for the poor is not just a utilitarian act of social justice (the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation does that); nor is it simply an altruistic act with no element of self-interest or expectation of reward.³ According to the gospels, it is something more: caring for the poor is the preferred way for Christians to serve God. We care for the poor not out of guilt, nor because poverty, in itself, is virtuous. Rather, in serving the poor, we care for our own souls by imitating Christ and God’s generous character.

We know that we are saved by grace, and not by what we do. The Jesus who voices this vision knows this, as well. But he also knows that the faith that comes to us through divine grace creates new perspectives. Grace opens our eyes to see things that we would otherwise miss. Grace begins, even today, to give us a preview to the end of things; when the reign of Christ will truly become complete.

And, so it is that by grace, we have the faith to bring our canned and dried goods to donate; even knowing that one meal for one family will not eliminate poverty. It is by grace, through faith, that we visit the sick, even those with chronic or terminal illnesses, to offer the hope we know through Christ of a new life and a new creation. And it is by grace, through faith, that we have converted a hundred-plus year-old barn into the “Pass It On” resale store; even while not knowing who will donate what, and who if anyone might come, and what each of these participants in the process may get out of it. It is the grace of God that lets us know that if one day we ask the question, “Lord, when did we see you?” Jesus may well answer us, “When not?”⁴

The ones who are proclaimed as being righteous before the judgment seat are those who have loved God by serving Christ; and the way they have served Christ is by loving their neighbor, especially when that neighbor is hungry or thirsty or sick or lonely.

² As quoted by Dan Clendenin, “The Very Thing I Was Eager to Do”

³ As referenced by Dan Clendenin, “The Very Thing I Was Eager to Do”

⁴ Scott Hoezee from *Center for Preaching Excellence*

As we step into a new liturgical year, beginning a week from today with the first Sunday of Advent, “What could be more surprising than a God who comes to dwell with us in the form of a poor, helpless child born in obscurity to peasant parents? Indeed”, Beverly Zink-Sawyer points out, “God came to us as ‘one of the least of these’ – and still does.”⁵

Justice and caring meet together when we allow ourselves to see and respond to the needs of our neighbors. Judgment need not scare us, but instead reassure us that God continues to be among us; that we can see the face of God all around us. It is by God’s grace, and through the gift of faith, that we are given the freedom to act: to care, to feed, to visit, and to heal, and to advocate for those who do the same. In so doing, we follow Christ’s example and heed his call to love. AMEN.

⁵ As quoted by Kathryn Matthews in “Weekly Seeds”