

November 20, 2011 Christ the King Sunday Matthew 25:14-30

-Keep it Simple Stewardship Campaign Week 4-

Our gospel reading today is Jesus telling the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats. They are separated into those who go to heaven and those who go to hell. Interestingly this is the only place in the entire New Testament where any detail is given to a final judgment scene. We may find the criteria for judgment to be surprising. It appears to be based on works of mercy alone - there's no mention of faith, beliefs, grace, or forgiveness.

Even though none of these things is mentioned, it is a parable after all. And it gets to the heart of the matter through a round-about way. This parable is obviously about judgment. The king judges who is good and who is bad. But did you notice the very subtle judgment that was also done by those who are being judged?

When those who get to go to heaven say they didn't realize that when they were helping the needy they were actually serving Christ, that also means they made no judgments upon those who were helping. I know that's confusing so let's come at it from

the other direction. When those who are sent to hell say they didn't realize that when they weren't helping the needy they weren't helping Christ, that also means that they had made a judgment upon the needy. If they had known it was Christ they would have helped, certainly. But, in their judgment those in need were not Christ and so they didn't help. You see how they have made a judgment of worthiness on their own? This group claims to have had the right to judge who is or is not worthy of Christ. The other group, the sheep who go to heaven, never presume such a role. They never judged anybody.

I saw this subtle judgment at work one time when I was in college helping out in a soup kitchen in Washington DC. It was Zacchaeus' Kitchen, and if ever there was a miserable little soup kitchen this was it. It was in the large basement of a church and provided lunch to a couple hundred people every day. During the weekdays the paid staff and some volunteers ran things. The food was almost all food that was donated by grocery stores that had either expired or in the case of fresh produce, was wilted or partially rotten. I remember the soup that we served tasted awful, and it was made up of whatever bits and pieces and cans of stuff had come in that day. Plus yesterday's leftover soup was dumped in too. I've often

wondered that when you forever add yesterday's soup to today's soup exactly how long have some of those ingredients been around? For desert we mixed a bucket of peanut butter with a couple gallons of honey and spread it on stale hot dog buns.

When people came through the line to get food it was obvious they weren't looking forward to it. In fact many of the people threw it away. But the staff and regular volunteers knew many of the people by name. They greeted them, laughed, and sometimes shared a joke. When everyone was served and the staff was able to eat they went right out there into the dining room and ate with the many smelly, dirty, creepy looking homeless people.

Then came the weekend. Each weekend a different church from the suburbs would send people in to give the regular staff a break. It was a nice gesture. They also brought in their own food. On the whole the food tasted much better. Dessert was brownies with chocolate frosting and a half a walnut on top of each piece. Little food was thrown away, and it was obvious the people like it. But the attitude of the volunteers was deplorable. One woman said to me numerous times with great

pride in her voice, "You see how we bring these good things in for these homeless people? We make sure they something much better than what they usually get." The volunteers, in their clean fashionable clothing, looked down their long noses at the poor homeless beggars who had come for food. When it came time to eat these volunteers stayed in the kitchen and ate by themselves. There were almost no words exchanged and no interaction between the volunteers and the homeless people.

Both groups had served the needy, but one group had judged. The other did not. One group acted out of love and recognized the humanity of every person who was in that building that day. One group considered themselves superior, and was obviously only doing it so they could return home to their immaculate lives proud of how good they had been. Even though this group of people had served the needy, they'd probably be goats in the parable. Imagine their shock when the homeless they served are numbered among the sheep!

The root of the parable is love; not the mechanics of giving food, water, or clothing to someone. The sheep had lived

in love. The goats had lived by calculating reciprocal relationships.

These thoughts take us to this final day of our Make It Simple stewardship campaign. The theme is sharing enough, or sharing of enough. The bulletin inserts talk about the difference between living in scarcity and living in abundance. If you want ever more then you are a goat living in scarcity. All of your actions are going to be calculations:

-How much time do I really want to invest in this old friendship that isn't going to take me anywhere anymore?

-How much longer will I stay in this neighborhood? Home values are falling and I want to get out before they fall too far.

-At what level should I give to this charity in order to maximize how far the praise and recognition will move me up the social ladder?

-How much do I have to give to church so God is happy with me and I get to go to heaven, and how much can I keep for myself?

The list is endless.

If you feel like you have enough then you are probably a sheep that is living in abundance. The sheep is content, thankful, and happy. And while the sheep will certainly make decisions based on experience and wisdom, not everything is a calculation. Not everything is a judgment.

At the beginning of this campaign you were invited to fill out a time and talent sheet. Here at the final day you are invited to consider a financial pledge. As you considered both things I hope you could do so from a sense of abundance. I don't say this because I think you'll give more. I say this because you will live with a sense of joy and wholeness. Many people who don't have much feel rich. And many people who have a lot feel poor.

Let me end with Martin Luther's thoughts on the beginning of the Apostles' Creed in the Small Catechism. The creed begins, "I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth." Luther asks, "What does this mean?" and then writes:

I believe that God has created me together with all that exists. God has given me and still preserves my body and soul; eyes,

ears, and all limbs and senses; reason and all mental faculties. In addition, God daily and abundantly provides shoes and clothing, food and drink, house and farm, spouse and children, fields, livestock, and all property - along with all the necessities and nourishment for this body and life. God protects me against all danger and shields and preserves me from all evil. And all this is done out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all!

For all of this I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him. This is most certainly true.

May you feel God's abundance in your life. Amen