

“When Did We See You?”

Valley Presbyterian Church – November 23, 2008

Christ the King Sunday

Rev. John Wahl

Ephesians 1:17-23

Matthew 25:31-40

At the National Cathedral in Washington, DC, there is a sign above the cash register in the gift shop which reads: “we may not have seen you take it, but God did.” God sees; and God knows. And according to the gospel reading we are looking at this morning, God will one day act upon that knowledge. God will separate the peoples of all the nations into two groups – those who have acted with mercy and compassion on one side and those who have not.

Both the sheep and the goats seemed surprised that their actions had any affect on God – “when did we see you?” they say. We know the answer, of course, because Jesus the future judge had been in their midst all along – in the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the homeless, the stranger and the prisoner. But, to those who stood before Jesus in order to be judged, they did not know; they did not realize that Jesus was not confined to one place and time; but could be everywhere, all the time.

Our Gospel today reads, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” Literally you *gathered me in*. There is a restaurant chain that, in their commercials, makes the claim that, “when you are here you are family.” That is the spirit of what the sheep were doing. What a challenge to us as a society as we struggle with the impact of immigration. There are truly strangers in our midst, not just in California or Florida, or Washington, DC, but here in Ohio as well. How easy it is to ignore them, or – as a group – even to blame them. The goats in this vision would have been guilty of not seeing the stranger. But, the challenge is not only to see them but to see them as also our brothers and sisters. The challenge is to see Christ in them and to gather them in.¹

The parable of the great judgment separates the sheep and the goats. This was in the common experience of those who listened to Jesus: Sheep preferred fresh air at night; goats preferred warmth. On the day of future judgment, Jesus says, the people of all the nations will be separated like sheep from goats. And the division will be according to our actions. Have we been doers of the word? And the actions are based on a conviction that as we have done them to the people in our lives and in our world, we have done them to Jesus: “As you have done it to the least of these,” Jesus says, “you have done it to me!”²

Throughout this section of Matthew’s gospel, Jesus has emphasized his message that relationship with God is not just a matter of having faith, but doing faith. The crucial aspect of our faith rests not just in knowing Jesus, but in responding to Jesus who calls us to come and follow; then to go and do likewise.

¹ Wiley Stephens, “Heaven’s Audit of One’s Soul”

² Kenneth Carter, “Our Spiritual Bottom Line”

As watchers of this vision of future judgment, as listeners of this warning to be doers and not only hearers of the word, we see Jesus in two places in this parable of the sheep and goats. He is both the king, sitting on the throne of judgment, as well as being among and amid those who were all called to serve.

Can we put ourselves in the place of Jesus in this parable? And if we can, which Jesus? This is the question we ought to ask. Jesus is judge, and Jesus is hungry, thirsty, homeless, and imprisoned. If we put ourselves in the place of Jesus the judge, we are making a big mistake. This goes against our grain, because wouldn't we all like to be the judge, to say "yes" or "no," "thumbs up" or "thumbs down," you get the prize or you get the eternal punishment? Or, if not the judge, wouldn't we like to know for certain that we have done enough – that our future spot among the flock of the sheep is assured; that we have acted with kindness and compassion sufficient to earn our place in the presence of the good shepherd.

As Thanksgiving approaches, you may be wondering, where is the grace? Where is the message about being thankful for the many blessings that we have received? Can we, in good conscience, gather later this week in our homes and among our families to share in the abundance that God has provided; knowing that Christ awaits us not only as a future judge, but also in those who have such obvious needs?

What if we devoted more of our time and energy toward doing these acts of compassion? Well, that would be great! The danger, of course, is that we set for ourselves a legalistic standard of caring? We may come to think we need to fulfill a checklist: feed someone hungry, visit someone in prison, give away some extra clothes, a dollar placed in one can, a quarter in another. When we set out to earn our place through our acts of compassion, we are bound to come up short. But, when we become doers of the word because we want to serve our sisters and brothers, and to serve strangers in our midst, when we participate in the free exchange of compassion within a community, then we give away the burden of having to earn way into God's grace. When we allow God to be the judge, then we no longer have to create arbitrary standards for doing enough; we do not have to make up checklists of compassion, seeking to win God's favor – instead of relying on the grace of God made known to us in gospel.

Although, chronologically, we have not yet reached in Matthew's story the day of Christ's resurrection, the passage today points forward to the spiritual conclusion of the Gospel – to the Good News. It begins with the words, "When the Son of Man comes in his glory..." This is the "When all is said and done," part of the story. It is the *moral* conclusion to the life, death and resurrection of Christ. Jesus is talking here about God's purpose for our lives. This is a vision of what it means to be accountable to God for the gift of life.³

I was reminded this week – as I know many of you are each week, every day – about this precious gift of life. On Friday morning, during the peak of the winter storm, I was driving south on 306 toward the church. I had just finished meeting with someone

³ John Jewell, "Be Compassionate"

who has spent the last fifteen years doing youth ministry Garfield and Maple Heights, and I was thinking about what more I could do – how I might help young people find and experience God's grace. After slowly making my way down the hill past Lake Lucerne, then up the hill, I put on my blinker to turn into the church driveway. At the last moment, I decided that instead, I would to the BP station and get some gas.

Then, within seconds, I saw that a car coming toward me, driving north, had slid sideways into my lane, probably not more than twenty feet in front of me. Before I knew it, I had swerved right and slid, nose-first, into the ditch – stopping a few feet in front of the church sign. Thankfully, no-one was hurt. Nothing had been damaged – although we might find a few tire tracks in the lawn when the snow melts. Within a few minutes, a tow truck had pulled me out and I was at my desk less than half-an-hour later.

So, I got to thinking; if it's possible for us to get stuck in the ditch, even in the shadow of the steeple of this very church, then maybe we sometimes are also the needy: the vulnerable and the lost. Sometimes, we require nurturing or assistance among one another within the church; sometimes, we need help from someone in the community to help us get unstuck. We are all in relationship – sheep and goats alike – all of us reside in families and communities, but only some of us act on that relationship – only some of us become doers of the word, and not just hearers.

The first question that Jesus asks us through this passage is, *What happens at the end?* The second question is, *When and where do we see Jesus?* And the third question is, *How do we connect with the last, the least and the lost?*

These three questions are related to each other: to our final judgment; and to a spiritual experience of Jesus in the Gospels. They lead us to recognize the tremendous human needs present in our world, especially among the hungry, the imprisoned, the spiritually empty, the lonely, and the homeless. Sometimes, they lead us also to see that we have needs as well: we require the reassurance of families; that we need the support and love of a faith community, and that we must give and receive among those in the community around us. Matthew 25 is not a passage of scripture that is intended to heap guilt upon us. It is, instead, an invitation to you and to me, saying: "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." It does not give us a checklist to follow; there is no minimum thresh-hold for us to meet. We are redeemed by grace, but as we act on that grace, we become doers of the word, not only hearers. We join the flock which is fed and tended by the Good Shepherd. When the time comes to sort us out, Jesus will know us; and also will know who we have known, who we have served, who we have taught, who we have learned from, who we have sat with, and prayed with.

God knows. That is the good news; that God came in Jesus Christ to save us, to bless us, and to inspire us to be doers of the word. That same God will come again to judge us. We know that it will be him; and he knows us, and loves us. Thanks be to God. AMEN.