

Last Sunday after Pentecost 2020
Year A, Matt 25: 31-46
St. Peter's
November 22, 2020

Let the words of my mouth and meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and redeemer.

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This morning is a time “in-between”. By that, I mean the season of Pentecost is now complete and next week we will begin a new liturgical year as Advent begins. Today is called Christ the King or the Reign of Christ Sunday because the triumphant Jesus reigns in glory as king and judge at the end of time.

Matthew tells his followers in this narrative about some sheep and goats with the warning that what we do matters and it matters a lot to Jesus. An important take away from this reading is that humankind will be judged when Jesus returns. I must admit that I am not keen on being judged and I presume that none of us are. For that reason, I prefer to look at this reading in a light other than only judgment.

This parable has several surprises that help us to understand the difference between these sheep and goats and which category we probably fall into. But then again, we should not be shocked by this because God surprises us all the time. Those people representing the sheep and goats are caught completely off guard by what they did, or what they did not do.

I find it interesting that apparently, the sheep had no clue that by showing compassion toward people in need, they were extending that concern and empathy to Jesus. Likewise, the goats had no inkling that their indifference and unconcern overlooked, if not abandoned, the Lord. Each group is shocked when Jesus either praises or criticizes their behavior and actions.

Both groups are surprised, really blown away, by their complete and utter failure to recognize Jesus. They are dumbfounded, if not dismayed by the unlikely places Jesus goes and the people that the Son of Man, Jesus, befriends. No one anticipates or expects to see Jesus in the faces of the poor, the hungry, the sick, the blind, and those in prison. These sheep and goats encounter Jesus in the most unlikely of places and with the most questionable people.

You see, these people, both the sheep and goats, were expecting a mighty and powerful King. They were looking for Jesus to be seated on the royal throne, magically manipulating the strings of the world to remove them from the ruthless, cruel rule of the Roman empire and collaborating Jewish leaders. They expected this new Messiah to bring relief from the burdens of unfair taxes, poverty, and blatant injustices. You know something, their expectations were not entirely unfounded or misplaced.

One of the ways that we think about the Creator of all things, our God, is as an entity that is all-knowing, all-powerful, mighty, fair, and just. Jesus, I believe, is trying to change that thinking so we may realize and understand God's existence in our lives even more fully.

Jesus is telling us that if we want to wholly experience God's presence, we must look for God in all the places that people are neediest, suffering, and living in fear or uncertainty. God asks to meet us not in some unreal, make-believe world, but in the world that daily surrounds us, a place where we can serve the needs of those people living in the dark shadows of brokenness and vulnerability.

As I said before, this parable has to do with judgment when Jesus returns, and as a result, there will ultimately be consequences for our actions. However, if we trust in God's love, we will have nothing to fear. The sheep and goats receive mercy and forgiveness, just as we each do from God. Jesus is telling us that we will find the face of God in our neighbor or stranger. We will meet God in those acts of mercy and service, and we will live in the full abundance of God's blessing when we serve as Christ served.

During this time of loneliness and uncertainty, it is good and proper to remind ourselves of the promise – and it is a promise – that Jesus really and truly offers himself to us in the real needs of our family, friends, neighbors, and strangers. God promises to bless our efforts when we reach out to the needy who are trying to put food on the table, pay the rent and utilities, and take care of children or elderly parents.

We will not find God where we expect Him to be. No, we will find Him just where we need God to be! Jesus Christ through God is present in the world in “the least of these” and our faithful church will be found in that very same place.

Thanks be to God!