

THE GOD WHO LOVES GOATS



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Nov 22, 2020
Matthew 25: 31-46

Today is the end of the liturgical year. The liturgical year always ends with a Sunday named: Christ The King. It was John Calvin who named the three-fold office of Jesus as Prophet, Priest, and King fulfilling all the offices of the Old Testament. Jesus is a Prophet, prophesied by Moses in Deuteronomy 18, who spoke with authority unlike no other; Jesus is a Priest, declared so by the author of Hebrews and is the One who makes the offering for sin appointed by God; and Jesus is King, whose rule is over the church and is the head of the church.

Both of our readings for this Sunday and next are from passages in Matthew and Mark that have apocalyptic or prophetic tones and are eschatological in nature or concerning judgment at end times. You might be thinking - what a way to end the liturgical year or begin the next one - - - except that what I hope we will see is how Christ as King allows us to remember that God still rules with compassion, acceptance and love and in the Advent of Christ we will be reminded to allow God in Jesus Christ to come to our hearts anew, giving us much needed hope.

Today, in our scripture, we see Jesus in His Kingly role in the end times as ruler and judge of all nations in what is considered a passage from end times.

Listen to the word of God as it comes to us from Matthew 25: 31-46.

³¹ “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³ and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴ Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ ⁴⁰ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’

⁴¹ Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴² for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ ⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ ⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ ⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

This is the word of the Lord.

In seminary, I remember taking a class on end times, death and dying. One of the goals of the class was to read current popular books on end times such as: Left Behind, The End of Days, The Lion and the Lamb, but we were also looking at scriptures that concerned end times.

I remember that this passage was our assigned reading for that day in class. As I walked to class with a friend of mine, now the Rev. Dr. Karen Brugler, I remember remarking to Karen that I wondered if Dr. Garrett, our professor, would be informing us who were the sheep and who were the goats. You see from my religious background and teaching I had heard the sheep and goats described as people who were either the sheep "or those who were in" and who were the goats "or those who were out" in the kingdom of God. My job was not to be a goat.

I distinctly remember my friend Karen's response. It was a response that I had never heard before. Karen said to me, "I think there are aspects of the sheep **and** goat in all of us". That day Karen gave me more to think about than our professor did.

Let's look at this passage again. Jesus has returned with His angels. He has taken His rightful seat on the throne of glory and all the nations are appearing before Him for judgment and He is separating people and nations in the same way that a shepherd would separate their flocks.

There truly are differences between sheep and goats. Goats are independent and can be aggressive whereas sheep are easily led by their shepherd. Goats are curious and will wonder away much quicker than a sheep would. A shepherd would separate sheep from goats at night as goats need shelter whereas sheep arrange themselves in community. Shepherds hearing this story from Jesus would not question why there is a separation between sheep and goats.

It helped me understand a bit more about where my friend Karen was coming from. While I love and appreciate community (like sheep) and I want community with God and with God's people (like sheep), I am fiercely independent, and I have chosen my own way (much like a goat). While I have helped others to find shelter (like a shepherd would for sheep) I have often and still do look towards my own shelter and comfort (like goats need). So, I don't see the goat as being bad. We certainly all have sheep and goat within us.

Jesus certainly knew this and tells this story from the future about people gathering before the throne. Those listening didn't know whether they were sheep or goats and so Jesus made this distinction:

1. The righteous (who are compared to sheep) are surprised to realize they had cared for Jesus; as evidently, they simply shared who they were and what they had freely without expectation.

2. The unrighteous (who are compared to the goats) are shocked that they missed opportunities to show love to Jesus when they did not share with their neighbors in need. Perhaps, had they known God in Jesus Christ was in their midst, they would have done the right thing. Yet, Jesus is looking for a natural overflow of love, not calculated efforts designed to determine a certain outcome.

What is interesting in this depiction of Jesus' judgment is there is only 1 criterion for God and that is whether people were able to see Jesus in the face of the needy gave yourself away in love.

Friends, this is how God saved us. He saw humanity broken and in need, hungry for acceptance and love, in prisons of our own making and God gave Himself, incarnate in Jesus Christ, to rescue us. **Let me assure you that God sent Jesus to rescue goats too.** God, this day, wants to rescue us from obsessing

about ourselves and our own needs by touching our hearts with love and compassion for others and by persuading us to care and see other human beings who need us.

So tell me – where have **you** seen Jesus? Did you see Him in the person standing on the street holding a sign? Did you see Him in the people coming to the Islamic Center recently receiving food? I know you heard about Jesus as you listened to Becky Gillespie talk about the Thanksgiving food cards being given away because you responded so generously. Or did you see Jesus when the mission committee talked about the 69 refugees that have come to Michigan? Do you see Jesus in the healthcare workers and volunteers on the frontline in this pandemic? Do you see Jesus in those who take to the streets trying to remind us that black lives matter and that are just as valuable as yours or mine? My friends, where have you seen Jesus?

It is so easy to read this scripture and miss the gospel message. We read the scripture and begin to measure ourselves wondering if we have done enough to be a sheep and enter eternal life or whether we are a goat and will someday hear God say to us – leave – your nothing but a goat! We need to remember that **we all have goat in us** – we all have missed opportunities to be the love and grace of Jesus Christ, we all could put ourselves on the left hand of Jesus.

I thank God every day that God apparently loves goats. I have come to believe that when we stand before the throne of God, the God and Creator of all will do a separation but what God will do is separate the self-serving part of us, the faithless part of us and cast it away. This (for me) is how the separation happens.

Jesus is reminding us that God is trying to save us from obsessing about ourselves or our own needs; God wants to touch our hearts with love and be able to see other human beings who need us; God wants us to love those for whom Jesus gave His life. We do it not to determine our own outcome with God as that

has already been determined – God loves us – God loves all of us. We do those things because we are in relationship with a God who isn't isolated on some distant throne somewhere – we worship a God who is here with us in the messiness of this life working in and through us to help all God's children.

Let us pray: *Holy God, forgive us when all we get from reading your holy words are ways to determine for You who is 'in' your kingdom and who is 'out'. Forgive us when we do not look for your face in every human face as the late congressman John Lewis challenged us to do. Thank you, thank you that you are a God who loves us completely – goat and all. Amen*