

**Pentecost 25A + Christ the King**  
**November 26, 2017 + Matthew 25:31-46**  
Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit, WI  
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Today is the last Sunday in the church year. In a series of vivid parables, Jesus has been preparing us for his return. Two weeks ago he told us how to get ready, reminding us to be prepared to give him a full welcome by having plenty of oil in our lamps. Last week he told us what to do during that time of preparation: Use the gifts, the talents, that God has given us and return them to God in greater measure.

And today, Jesus tells us what will happen upon his return: He will separate the faithful from the unfaithful. This is not a parable, but an illustration of what will actually take place. The main point is that judging is God's job, not ours. We remember from that parable of the sower that It is God who will separate the wheat from the weeds, and here the Son of Man who will separate the sheep from the goats. The sheep are those who have embraced Jesus, and whose countless acts of love and mercy to those in need are so natural that they're not even aware of them. The goats are those who have rejected Jesus, whose hard-heartedness toward those in need is so natural that they are not even aware of it.

Separating sheep and goats. Why can't Jesus let us take care of that? We may think we know the difference. When I found this cookie cutter in Target on Friday, I knew right away it was a goat. (That was the only thing I bought, by the way, and it wasn't on sale.) And their behavioral traits are very different. Sheep have a strong flocking instinct and are

terrified of becoming separated, whereas goats are curious, independent and stubborn. However, many of the 1,000 types of sheep in Africa and the Middle East look a lot like goats, with short brown coats and horns. At a glance it's hard to tell one from the other. It's hard to tell, so it's best to leave the separating to someone who knows them well.

When it comes to separating the righteous from the unrighteous, God—or Jesus as the Son of God—is the only expert. We may delude ourselves into thinking we can distinguish good people from bad people. But as the sexual harassment scandal is demonstrating, you just never know. Even the perpetrators themselves seem not to know: Until they were caught, many had condemned others for doing the very same thing. And who among us, anyway, is perfect? As Jesus says, let him who is without sin cast the first stone at the accused. And none will be thrown.

I suppose it's kind of like Santa Claus, who's supposedly the only one who knows whether we've been naughty or nice. Only God knows who is a sheep and who is a goat, and how that will all play out on his return. So an ethical interpretation of this reading is off the mark. It's not telling us to be more like sheep, because we are already condemned sinners and we have already been forgiven. Instead, we are invited to reflect here on the miracle in which the sheep, going about their daily business, meet Christ the King face to face: "Truly I tell you," Jesus says, "just as you did it to one of the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you did it to me."

Who are Jesus' brothers and sisters? They are those for whom Jesus came into the world. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," Jesus tells the congregation in his hometown

synagogue in Luke 4, “because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free.” In Luke 19 Jesus tells the tax collector Zacchaeus that “the Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost.” All these are Jesus’ brothers and sisters.

How often have you been astonished, maybe even your breath taken away, by meeting Jesus in a way you never would have expected? Maybe you didn’t realize it at the time, but only in thinking back on it later. In the person of someone on the street who is asking for a dollar. You decide to stop and talk with them, and as they tell you what makes it possible for them to go from one day to the next, you realize that they are ministering to you through Jesus’ own eyes. In the person of someone who suddenly finds that they need help, and there you just happen to be, and whose gratitude is poured out onto you from Jesus’ own heart as they proclaim—to your astonishment--that you are truly an angel of God.

Even in the “random acts of kindness” our culture encourages us to do because they’ll supposedly make us feel better, Jesus still shows up. There was a good example in year’s Thanksgiving episode of “The Middle,” a TV show that’s a Raabe family favorite. On a car trip to their Thanksgiving dinner, Heck family approaches a toll booth. Even though they’re basically broke, Frankie, the kooky mother, suddenly decides they should pay for the car behind them because it’s Thanksgiving. For miles and miles, Frankie, Mike and the kids eagerly wave to the occupants of the other car, expecting a “thank you,” a thumbs-up, or some sign of appreciation, but are met only with confused and then frightened looks.

The Hecks get angrier and angrier—how can those people be so ungrateful, especially at Thanksgiving?

Finally there is a huge traffic jam, and people get out of their cars because there's nothing better to do. This gives Frankie the chance to confront the other couple. "What's wrong with you people?" she says. "How come you couldn't even say thank for us paying your toll way back there? We just wanted to do something nice on Thanksgiving!"

"Oh, you paid for us?" they reply, incredulous. Apparently, the toll collector had just pocketed the money. "How wonderful of you to think of doing such a nice thing!" They shower Frankie and Mike with praise, and everyone ends up having an impromptu Thanksgiving meal on the hood of the car. New friends, new community, new life.

No matter whether we are finally judged to be sheep or goats, Jesus is present in all these encounters, inviting us to meet him face to face. What joy to know that he is right here in our midst, just waiting for us to recognize him!

But what of that final separation of between the sheep and the goats, and the eternal punishment that awaits the latter? What's that all about?

I stand with the ELCA's presiding bishop, Elizabeth Eaton, who was recently asked by the Chicago Sun-Times whether there is a hell. She replied, "There may be, but I think it's empty." Why? Because, she said, Jesus was clear in the Bible that after he is raised up, he will draw all people to himself. All people. The sheep and the goats. Judgment aside, this is the final reality.

In the meantime, let's be looking for Jesus in the faces of those around us. Because Christ the King tells us that he will be with us always—to the end of the age.

AMEN.