It may not be intentional, but it does seem appropriate to celebrate Christ the King Sunday at the end of the month which begins with Election Day. This Election Day in particular, above all the others any of us have ever seen, has been a testament to not only the division that exists within American society, but also the rancor which accompanies it. On both sides, faithful people wonder, “How could a real Christian person ever vote for *that guy*?”

The only logical conclusion, obviously, is that almost exactly one half of our country are evil people, committed to stirring up chaos and opposed to recognizing the dignity of human life. These people must have a corrupt and illegitimate faith, one that they can twist and contort to match their political affiliation. There can be no other explanation, can there?

We grow up learning that there is right and there is wrong and it is our job to tell the difference; but when we try to do that, we find that very often there is no one “right” and no one “wrong,” but just a lot of options with varying degrees of both. Another place where that is becoming abundantly clear is as we try to find a new normal in the midst of this pandemic. Whether we are talking about how to spend the holidays or how to worship or attend school, we are realizing that most often there are no good choices, that we are almost always trying to find the best option out of a bunch of bad ones.

Jesus’ parable today offers some comfort with a simple, black and white answer, a single box to check, a single criterion to meet. It assures us that those people who do not measure up, those “bad” people out there, will get what’s coming to them. And that is what also terrifies us, because we each have to face the question of whether we are one of the “bad” ones. I wonder if it is this fear of being found wanting that causes us to look at stories like these through the lens of a checklist, seeking what it is we have to do or be or believe in order to be on the safe side. If I can make sure I check off the correct box, then I don’t have to worry about being one of the goats, and that gives me something to cling to when everything else seems so unstable.

Reading the parable like this also means that anyone who’s not like me, who doesn’t “check the right box,” must be different, must be wrong somehow. Reading the parable like this has us separating ourselves from the others in the flock, mentally marking the differences between the sheep and the goats. “How could anyone possibly be that way?” The answer must be that they are goats.

Some people look at Jesus’ parable and find it troubling. They see a harsh and angry God who seems to have no room for mercy or forgiveness. I look at this parable, and I see a message to people who are struggling with the same question we are struggling with: “How could anyone possibly think that way?” We want so desperately to be able to separate the black and the white, the good and the bad, the sheep and the goats, and to know for certain which side we’re on—and, perhaps, who’s on the other side.

It so happens that I had an opportunity last week to find the answer to that question I’ve been hearing so much lately—or, at least, one answer. My father-in-law came to visit from Wisconsin to help us with some house projects in preparation for winter. He and I vote differently—very differently. And so, since I had a whole week to spend with him, I got to ask him the question I’ve heard so often: “How could anyone support him?”

I don’t need to get into the specifics of what we talked about, but I will say that one of the most important things I learned is that we both come to our very staunch political positions for the same reason. It turns out that his sincerely held religious convictions—convictions which we mostly share—lead him to a completely different conclusion than me. Turns out the world isn’t black and white after all; just lots of shades of grey.

St. Matthew, in including this story, is wrestling with that same conundrum. He’s wondering why not only why evil seems to exist side-by-side with good, but why they are so doggone hard to tell apart sometimes. St. Matthew is also the only gospel writer to record the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares. In that story, the landowner tells his farmhands to let the wheat and the weeds grow together and to separate them only at the final harvest; otherwise, he says, “in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them.” (Mt 13.29). I imagine St. Matthew and his congregation finding themselves in much the same spot we are, asking how good, faithful people, fellow Jews and even friends and family, could possibly fail to see Jesus as God’s messiah, how they could support and agree with such awful leadership in their synagogues.

I wonder if St. Matthew includes this story here because he and his community have found that it’s impossible for them to tell the difference between the wheat and the tares, to be able to separate the sheep from the goats. I think that he takes comfort in the idea that in due time, someone smarter and wiser and more powerful than he will be able to do just that.

You see, that’s really the center of this story. Neither the sheep nor the goats are the main characters; neither have any clue what’s going on until well after their stories are over. Everybody is equally ignorant in this parable—except for one figure. At the center of this parable is the One who will eventually be called upon to finally set things right and separate the bad from the good once and for all.

I see in this story Matthew finally throwing up his hands and admitting that neither he nor anyone he knows—not even his fellow “sheep” in his flock—are capable of determining what is right or even best for the world. In this story, he is abdicating any claim he might have to that power; he is confessing that no king, no priest, no holy man or zealot or president or billionaire or tech genius can ever save us in the way we need to be saved. He shares this story to invite us to turn from all those would-be saviors and trust in the one who has the real power.

St. Paul writes, “I pray that… with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know… what is the immeasurable greatness of God’s power,” the power with which the Son of Man sits on the throne and separates the sheep from the goats. But what is the “immeasurable greatness” of this power? It’s not in the ability to command armies or inflict pain or even to condemn to the fires of hell or reward with eternal life. It’s not even the power to feed himself or clothe himself or heal himself. The only power that God has—the only power that God needs—is the same power with which God first spoke creation into being, the power that rescued the Hebrews from Egypt and sustained them through exile, the power that pierced the veil between heaven and earth to allow God to become human—and then did it again to raise that crucified human from the grave. The immeasurably great power of God is love.

It is love that first sparked the dream of earth and its peoples in God’s heart, love that stirred God to answer the cries of the slaves, love that brought God to earth and raised God up on the cross. It is love that overpowered death and rolled back the stone. It is love that looks after the naked and hungry and sick and imprisoned, that separates the sheep from the goats and shows us the way to life without limits.

I take comfort in the thought that there is One who has enough power, enough wisdom, and above all, the enough love to make sense of this world, to finally and forever root out the hidden cancer of evil that permeates our world and establish real justice and a lasting peace. I trust that One to know how get us to where God has always intended us to be.

And yet, at the same time, I also cringe at the thought that that One might, in order to accomplish that, condemn anyone—deserving or not—to eternal punishment in the fire prepared for the devil and his angels. Does that bother you, too? That cringe makes me wonder: if I am torn by even my imperfect and faithless love for those poor goats; if I, as fickle and vindictive as I am, would save them if I could, then what does that say about the One who loves perfectly and who actually has the power to do just that? Perhaps this is why the world is the way it is: because as messy as this all seems, it is actually the best, most loving way for God to bring life without limits not just to the sheep, but to everyone.

Of course, that doesn’t mean everyone has found this life—at least, not yet. We still ring our hands and wonder whether we or someone we love might be found among the goats at the end. We still try to save ourselves with our good works and our right beliefs. Could it be that the fire of punishment, prepared for the devil and his angels, isn’t some eternal hell waiting for the so-called “wicked” when they die, but rather the tormenting question of whether we are sheep or goats—the question that results from trusting in ourselves, or an institution, or a political candidate more than we trust in God? Could it be that hell is trying to take over God’s responsibility and by condemning the goats ourselves?

With that in mind, I can’t help but wonder if the whole point of this parable is not about who is condemned and who is saved, but rather about helping us figure out what—and Who—is the only real power capable of saving the universe.