

**Reign of Christ - November 22, 2020 - St. Anne's
Ezekiel 34:11-16; Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46**

Today is the last Sunday of the church year - the Sunday we call Reign of Christ, or Christ the King. Next Sunday we start the whole cycle of the year again when, with the start of Advent, we prepare ourselves for the birth of the Christ child into the world. But **today** we get a glimpse of the *end* of the story. Today, before we start again at the beginning, we lift the back cover and peek at the happy ending and remind ourselves that it's *God's* reign of peace and justice that will ultimately prevail. But, that happy ending doesn't come without cost – because inherent in celebrating the coming of the Reign of Christ is the truth that this also means we will face judgement about how we did, or **didn't**, act in ways *congruent* with God's reign.

The *idea* of divine judgement is one that makes many of us uncomfortable. Perhaps because religion and judgment have been so *unhappily* married for so long. Or maybe, we just don't like the idea of *anyone* judging us. Or maybe it has to do with our desire for an *unconditionally* loving God who simply **won't** judge us no matter *what* we do. Because, unless you're a psychopath, we all know that *we* fall short of being the person we wish we were. But whether or not we **like** the idea that we'll be held to account for our actions, the bible tells us that while God **does** love us and wants **all** of creation brought into the Kingdom, God also **does** have expectations of how we're going to *act* in this world. Because what we do on this earth **matters** to God.

And so, in today's parable Jesus is telling us we need to allow ourselves to be **fully** claimed by God's grace and love so that, like our metaphorical sheep, we live out the love of God in our ongoing actions.

While this parable is usually called ‘the sheep and the goats’, I think it might be better called ‘the great surprise’ because **everybody** in this parable is equally surprised and puzzled by the *standard* of judgement. *Neither* group lived their lives expecting to be judged in this way. As their sentences are handed down, both groups say: “We didn’t know we’d be judged for *that*.” “I didn’t know that it was *you* Lord that I was dealing with.” The sheep didn’t treat others with compassion because they were expecting to be judged on it - they were just living their lives – but they lived them in a way that allowed the compassion of God to flow through their lives. I get the impression that the goats would happily have done the right thing if they’d only known that it would matter. "if we knew it was *you* Lord we *would* have helped."

Neither the sheep *nor* the goats knew they were supposed to look for **God** in the dark and dirty places of the world. But both groups discover that Jesus was hiding in plain sight all along. He’d been right there with them all the time in the midst of daily life in all its mundane messiness - not holed up with the holy in the Temple, or sitting on some majestic mountaintop but present in the ‘least of these’. In truth, it’s part of our normal human ways, to pay more attention to the winners than the losers in life. But Jesus is insisting here that it’s not **God’s** way. In the words of one theologian "In Jesus' eschatological vision we discover that when Jesus does come into our heart, he brings all of needy humanity along with him!"¹

¹ Jensen (*Preaching Matthew's Gospel*) pg 222

This text challenges us to remember that we aren't faithful, or spiritual, simply because we attend church, or pray, or we occasionally make a contribution to a worthy cause. We're reminded here that true faith *transforms our lives*, opening our eyes to encounter the sacred in our everyday lives, including the sacred found within **all** our brothers and sisters. Faith transforms us to see the sacred in each other, and to reach out to help even when there's a *cost* to **us** in helping them. To see the *sacred* in 'the least of these' even through it's so much *easier* to see it in a beautiful house of worship, or in glorious music, or in the beauty of nature. It can be *hard* to see the image of God in our fellow humans - *especially* those who don't share our values, or who quite frankly sometimes just don't seem *worthy* of our concern.

But as Beverly Zink-Sawyer observes, the followers of Jesus "do acts of love and compassion *not* to earn a place among the righteous sheep, or even a place in heaven, but in response to what God has already done for us ...we are compelled to love others because we know no other way to respond to God's amazing love."

The images of judgement in this parable are meant to remind us we worship a God who *loves us* enough to be **angry** when we're indifferent to each other's suffering. A God who loves us enough to *call us to account* for how we care, or *don't* care, for each other. A God who cares intimately about **every** being in the world. Every one of the billions of humans, every plant, every bird, every animal. A God who loves each and **every one of us** *fiercely* and expects **us** to be *open* to that love and to allow it to flow through *our* actions and our way of life. Because what we do in this world **matters**. The

suffering of the sick and the lonely and the poor matters to *God*, and so it *should* matter to us. Not as a **means** for **us** to live a righteous life but because **they** have dignity and worth in themselves. Because they, like we, are made in the *image of God*.

Today we end this liturgical year, and prepare our hearts once again to celebrate God breaking into the world through the birth of the Christ Child. Today we stand at the pivot point of the year, looking both *back* 2000 years to the birth of a baby and, at the same time, *forward* to a future where God's Kingdom comes to fulfillment. We live in the time *between* Christ's coming into the world, and the *fulfillment* of God's plan. And in this 'in-between time' Jesus reminds us we are called to allow the ways of God's Kingdom to seep into and through our lives. To allow the love of God to *transform* us so that our **lives** reflect the care and compassion of God. So that we, like the sheep in the parable, will be surprised by God's *affirmation* of our actions.