

Pastor Jon's November 22, 2020 Sermon.

The Sheep and Goat

Text: Matthew 25:31-46

How about some good ole fire and brimstone as we deal with the final judgement in our lessons today? But my fire and brimstone is more like the Sesame Street children's book "The Monster at the End of This Book." That book masterfully builds the suspense by daring the reader not to turn the page. It builds up the scariness only to find out the Monster at the end of the book is the lovable, furry Grover. Our book, the Bible, definitely lays down the law for us, but in the end, Jesus is the gift of grace we get at the end of the book.

Well, here we go. Our Gospel starts off telling us that Son of Man will return to judge all nations like a shepherd separates sheep from goats.

But this judge will apparently come incognito... disguised as your neighbor who is hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, or in prison the least of these in our midst.

The criteria for judging will be on how well you cared for those most vulnerable among us.

In other words, you who hear the teachings of Jesus and act on them like in the Sermon on the Mount teaches, will be the like the sheep... the righteous ones... and end up at Jesus' right hand. And the ones who don't follow the call to love the neighbor will be the goats and enter into eternal judgement.

How am I doing with the fire and brimstone so far? Are you scared?

If I am reading this correctly, we must pay close attention to our sins of omission (e.g. sins unknown to us, how our actions affect others around the globe) instead of solely concentrating on our sins of commission (e.g. adultery, dishonesty, bad temper, lying, idolatry, etc.)

To sum it up... We know we are plenty good at getting ourselves in trouble with our words and actions. But it is what we don't do can also get us in trouble.

But thanks be to God that we are Lutherans. Yes, there will be a judgement day, and we are to be ready for it at any time. We are to travel light on this earth and take care of any unfinished business now while we are alive... which includes caring for the least of these.

As Lutherans, we believe scripture interprets scripture. We always end with the good news of Jesus Christ... the gospel. So we turn to scriptures like Romans 8:31-37 that says nothing in heaven or on earth will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. No principalities or powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation. This is such good news for us today as we all are hurting in some way. God cares for us and for the most vulnerable in our society.

Our faith is so much more than going to heaven. I don't know about you, but I don't sit around in my office wondering if I am going to go to heaven or not. I already believe in the promise of eternal life that I receive through my faith in Jesus Christ and my baptism. There is so much ministry to be done, so many hurting people, prayers to pray, needy ones to feed, children to love, visits to be made, justice to be served, and family to tend to. This is where my focus is as a Christian.

Our work as Christians is never done, and we will never get just right. We will always fall short. But the thing I love about this parable is the fact that righteous... the sheep... didn't even know they were the righteous. They just went about their daily lives serving the least of these in their midst. And the surprise at the end was the reward of being with Jesus at his right hand. What they did to the least of these, they did it to Jesus himself.

Thankfully our judge is none other than Jesus Christ himself, who went to the cross for us. He came to this broken world as a baby in a manger and taught us a new way. He loves us and forgives us exponentially. If he stooped so low to meet us on the cross, he won't

abandon us now, no matter how good or bad we are or what we are going through.

Each week we gather to hear this story in church. We come confessing our sins of omission and commission. We hear the words of forgiveness proclaimed. We open the scriptures. We hear the good news of Jesus and his love. We receive as a free gift his body and blood in communion. We are reminded that we are saved by no act of our own, but by God's act in Jesus Christ. We are then sent out to love others as he first loved us.

Our good works to the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick, and prisoners are simply a response to what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

In the midst of living our lives as followers of Jesus and caring for the least of these among us, Jesus promises to meet in the face of those you are serving. Not so scary after all.