

Little Christs

A sermon preached by

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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. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴Then 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; ³⁵for 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, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ ³⁷Then 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? ³⁸And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ ⁴⁰And 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.’ ⁴¹Then 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; ⁴²for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³I 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.’ ⁴⁴Then 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?’ ⁴⁵Then 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.’ ⁴⁶And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

I don’t know about you, but after nearly a month of apocalyptic judgement from Matthew’s gospel I’m ready to move on to another gospel. This week it isn’t only waiting for Jesus’ return, it’s the sheep and the goats – eternal punishment and a whole lot of stuff we don’t often associate with Jesus. The Sunday after Thanksgiving we’d have hoped for something a little softer. This passage has been used and misused throughout the ages for all manner of exclusion and it seems important to identify that reality.

But before we move on to our favorite Advent hymns and Christmas carols, perhaps it might be helpful to see how we might read this story in the midst of today’s reality. Now, I’m venturing into territory that would be better addressed by our own Dr. Hagedorn. I’ve read that in North America, sheep and goats are easily distinguishable, due to specialization through

breeding. But this was not always the case, especially in Jesus' time. In fact, throughout history, and still today in parts of Asia and Africa, sheep and goats are almost identical, and no one but a shepherd can easily tell the difference.

If we can't tell a sheep from a goat by their outward appearance, then it seems that how one acts and behaves would be a more telling way to make that determination.

Sheep have always been defenseless, dependent on their shepherd. Goats, on the other hand, have a reputation for being independent, opinionated, and curious at best—or vulgar, dangerous, and destructive at worst. One author described goats as “Jack Russells with hooves.”

And I think that is why the distinction between the sheep and the goats extends not to our appearance, our skin color, gender or sexual identities, our economic status - but instead to what we do, how we act.

Matthew portrays this as being on Christ's right hand because those have fed, clothed, visited, and cared for the lowliest, the lost, the left-behind, the unlovely, and the unloved.

Several years ago, Mark Spitznagel, a former big deal hedge fund manager, bought a couple hundred acres of land outside of Northport, Michigan. His plan was to become a goat herder and cheese producer. He called the operation Idyll Farms and it is built on the rolling hills south of Northport, just a mile or two from Lake Michigan.

If you drive by the farm today, it looks like something out of a Disney movie. The barns, out buildings, and fences are all constructed from fieldstones and the place is absolutely beautiful.

Proving that sometimes success is contagious, Idyll's cheeses have won Gold medals in the U.S. and Europe. It is a certified humane farming operation. A few years ago, Spitznagel, gained even more attention when he brought 60 goats, unannounced, in a guerilla farming effort, to some vacant lots in Detroit. That one didn't end well, at least for the goats, but it still gave him lots of PR. But in the end, no matter what you call it, package it, or label it, no matter what awards you give it...with my apologies to all the goat farmers out there -- it is still a goat farm.

As much pause as it gives me to be the one who is describing who is in and who is out, I think that sometimes we Christians are called to make the distinction between good and evil, sheep and goats. And it is hard for me to think that we are not in some kind of goat farming mode right now in our world. The *vulgar, dangerous, and destructive* seem to be winning the day. Too often, what we say doesn't match what we do.

The apocalypse that Matthew envisioned is a time of profound change. The world as we know it is swept away, and in its place a new time, a newborn world, emerges. The social order is scattered. We no longer recognize the place. And what opens before us now, says the evangel, depends on our hearts and minds, on the way we see and respond to the world at hand.

Will we be a people who blame others for their own poverty? Will we be a people who feed only the well-behaved? Will we give our Star Tree and Alternative Christmas gifts conditionally? Will we support and heal others whose voices we hear through the outing of mostly men whose sexual atrocities leave us speechless? Will we say that only violence can stop violence? And will there be new war? Will the old wars we are fighting now ever end?

The hope of the world rests on Christ's shoulders, we like to say. Yet, in this reading, Christ shifts that mantle to our shoulders. It is our justice he is judging, our compassionate care he is eager to see. C. S. Lewis, drawing on the work of Martin Luther, wrote that *... the Church exists for nothing else but to make us little Christs. If they are not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself, are simply a waste of time.*¹

Every day there are Little Christs with large hearts whose lives are spent bending to the needs of the least. On Thursday lots of those folks gathered here to serve Thanksgiving dinner to over a hundred people. Last Sunday night at the Bundled Blessings fund raiser we heard that they had given away 400,000 diapers in the last four years. In a quieter way, the lonely and the sick here at the church are being visited by good and faithful folks. In all of these actions, these *Little Christs* emulate the generosity of God. And they show us the way not just to the least of these, but to the very way to heaven's door.

There is clueless darkness out there, but in the midst of these shadows, Advent is coming and it will open a way for us to find the eternal message of hope and love. In Advent's upheaval of the world, a Child will be born, the light of God will be displayed, the flame of hope will warm us, and the Word of God will pour into us, from a continent and a culture that is unlikely to be ours.

Somewhere, out of our view, the Child will grow and prosper, waiting for the right time to appear. She may appear as a desperate refugee. He may appear as a student whose school is

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

understaffed. They might be a candidate with small chances. And we will all be given a chance to respond, in the winter of the world, as we search for eternal life.

Advent is coming in the midst of the need, the shabbiness, the famine, the nakedness, the hands clenching prison bars, the broken body, the blood poured out. For its timeless message is that in the desperate stranger, lives the Glory of God.

And we are called to choose who we will be. AMEN