

Proper 29A – Christ the King – November 23, 2014
Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Psalm 100; Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46
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Here we are on the last Sunday of the Christian calendar, also known as Christ the King Sunday. Today we worship Christ the King, the Head of the Church. Christ the King – above us, among us, *and* in us, is the One who sees all and knows all. That’s awesome – and sobering. According to this gospel lesson which appears only in Matthew, what Christ the King will do on the final day with all that seeing and knowing will be to sort us out into two groups as a shepherd separates goats to the left and sheep to the right, goats into eternal punishment and sheep into eternal life, depending on how we have behaved during our lifetimes. Matthew uses a lot of other images as well to describe this final separation, such as wheat and weeds, good seed and bad, wise maidens and foolish ones, good fruit and bad or no fruit, to name a few. He uses all of these—and, by the way, his is the only gospel who uses any of them—because Matthew is very intent on making his point that our lives are consequential. Matthew is telling us that our relationship with God is not so much a matter of having faith as it is a matter of *doing* faith. Where we do not do our faith, there are consequences. Thus, there is this picture of a final judgment that will separate the sheep from the goats. Of course we recall other pictures from scripture that speak of *all* being raised up on the last day, of God being “*all in all*,”ⁱ of the first being last and the last, first, but of no one being tossed out of the line altogether.

I don’t think we’re going to understand all of this today or anytime soon while we are still alive. It is important though to see what other lessons this text does give us about living out our faith and the more immediate and present ways that we find that life is consequential.

One lesson is that both our first reading from the prophet Ezekiel and our gospel image from Jesus teach that faith and compassion and justice are all intimately linked with each other and with the least and the lost, the poor and disenfranchised. The quality of our faith is tested by how we stand with one another—that is, by the quality of compassion and justice amongst us and across the land. The Hebrew prophets measured the quality and character of justice by assessing how people were dealing with widows, orphans and strangers and foreigners—people on the edge, on the margins, socially and economically. The primary message of the prophets, like Ezekiel, was not that people had neglected Scripture, or forgot attendance at the Temple, or worshipped false gods, but that people had forgotten the poor, and therefore had forgotten God. Without the doing of justice and mercy God remains unknown. Jesus continues this line as he challenges all to keep their eye on the edge of the circle, on the poor, for God is there. Jesus announces his mission by bringing “good news to the poor,” and Jesus reveals himself as the center of a new web of relationships—a new community—with the poor as its privileged locus. All that is quite contrary, for example, to how we as a society and nation and world have failed to address the ever-increasing visible and less visible poverty divide that exists. Today’s readings, in fact, take us beyond just individual faith responses by addressing the nations of the world. As we look carefully, the gospel text begins with all the nations being summoned before the king, and being given notice that the best test of a nation’s

righteousness is how it treats its most vulnerable people! Or as former Senior Minister of Riverside Church, James Forbes, put it, “Nobody gets to heaven without a letter of reference from the poor.”

A second lesson is revealed when we read the gospel carefully and notice that both sheep *and* goats are totally baffled by the verdicts they receive. “When was it that we saw you...?” That is what they *both* say to the king. Although this passage may have been written to get a goat’s attention, as it were, it is important to note that the sheep do not know what they have done right any more than the goats know what they have done wrong! Sheep and goats: neither are particularly flattering metaphors here. In fact, as one observer of symbolic language writes,

““Unlike its cousin, the cooperative sheep, the goat is a cunning and intelligent creature hard to contain, feisty and temperamental...independent and, in a word, capricious (from the Latin *capra*, [which means] ‘goat’). The wild goat scrambles up the craggiest and most treacherous mountainscapes to graze upon the heights and when domesticated thrives with a built-to-suit barnyard knoll on which to perch. They can and will scale nearly any fence, turn up on the roof, or even climb upon the backs of other animals...Yet the Judeo-Christian West has projected on the rutting billy goat’s compulsiveness and strong odor, together with its independence and strange look, the very devil...a bearded and horned goat’s head and hooves, typifying carnal lust and black magic. Upon the scapegoat in Judaic lore [see Leviticus 16:22] and elsewhere, sins, shame or illness were magically transferred and it was then loosed in the wilderness...The good sheep stay with the flock, pasture peacefully in the valley, and follow along, while the potent, feisty, wild and striving goat of our imagination stirs trouble and follows his own often shameless lead, at the same time often attaining the highest heights...The sheep, a social animal, enjoys the comfort and companionship of the flock...Because the sheep is easily herded, it has acquired the reputation of meekness and passivity; a ‘sheep’ lacks initiative and discrimination, and the shadow aspect of a collective ‘flock’ is the inability of its members to think independently...”ⁱⁱ

Yes, and in this parable, both the metaphoric passive/collective sheep and independent/capricious goats are oblivious to the ultimate importance of their actions or inaction, probably because they thought no one was looking. They thought they were dealing with nobodies, not somebodies. Who would have thought that “the least of these” would turn out to be Christ in disguise? When the kingdom comes, the most important things we have done may turn out to be the things it never occurred to us to count.

And so a third and related lesson is discovering where Christ the King is in all this—he is certainly not just on a throne! Barbara Brown Taylor observes that, “for the characters in the story, the biggest surprise of all seems to be that Jesus knew what they were up to when they did not think he was around. Sheep and goats alike, they thought that he occupied [only] one space at a time just as they did, and that the way they behaved in his presence was all that really counted. Meanwhile, that left them lots of free time [to care or not to care when they were running into lots of others] in their lives, including the ones

who did not count—the little ones, the least ones...the nursing home residents, the panhandlers, the inmates,” the checkout clerk, all the strangers on the street, at the grocery store.ⁱⁱⁱ Taylor also points out that the biggest surprise of all is that such people are not unknown to the king. On the contrary, they are so close to the king that he counts everything done or not done to them or for them or with them as if it had been done or not done to him (or for him or with him). For sheep and goats alike, the surprise is that Jesus is not somewhere—he is everywhere—and especially with the supposed least important people who enter our lives straight on, or peripherally each day, whoever they may be.^{iv}

Okay, so say that Jesus is present in every single person whose path crosses ours, and particularly in the lost ones, the last ones we would ever have expected. So how do we live then, knowing that? How do we find the courage to get through each day knowing that every pair of eyes may be Jesus’ eyes, especially those that are asking us for some recognition, some time, some help? All we know is that we are asked to wrestle with that fact, to let it challenge us and unsettle us and—who knows?—maybe even to comfort us with the awareness that Jesus is so present with us and around us that we have such unlimited opportunities to meet him and serve him. Again, as Barbara Brown Taylor points out, the only way to tell if the eyes you encounter are really Jesus’ eyes is to look into them, to risk that moment of recognition that may break your heart, or change your mind, or make you mad, or make you amend your life. Whatever effect it has on you, that seems to be the one thing that separates the sheep from the goats, the one thing that the sheep know how to do that the goats haven’t tried—namely, to look, to see, to connect, to respond. Of course, sometimes when you look into those eyes you encounter, all you see is your own helplessness, your own inability to know what is right and how to respond.^v

So, one answer is that we are called into relationship – in whatever setting, even when that relationship is unlikely and momentary, or sad or unsettling. We are called to look at each other and see Christ, who promises to be there when our eyes meet, and in that glance, to teach us something we need to know; but we cannot know them if we will not look. The goats are not condemned for doing bad things, remember, but for doing nothing. They bore the hungry, the thirsty, and the stranger no malice per se; they simply did not see any relationship between their lives and the lives especially of the least, the lost, and the last. Well, there can be a relationship. It is up to each one of us to decide what we will do—or will not do—about it, and not just each one of us individually but all of us together, and as a nation and world. The sheep and goats in this story both speak in unison: “When was it that we saw you...?” they say, together, reminding us that we are part of a community, and a nation, and a community of nations, and that more often than not we can do things together that we cannot do alone. We are together. And together we can welcome others in and widen our embrace. We can do this because we are one people with Christ as our King. Taylor reassures us that when the time comes to sort us out, Christ’s are the eyes that will meet our eyes, the eyes of the King who sees, who knows—who knows when we have looked and when we have looked away; who knows the last, the lost, the least and who lays down his life for us all.^{vi} The one who will judge us most finally, thank God, is the one who loves us most fully.^{vii}

This gospel lesson today is one of the most vivid parables which Jesus ever spoke, and the good news of it is pretty clear. The things which Jesus picks out for service to the King—giving a hungry person a meal, or a thirsty person a drink, welcoming a stranger, cheering the sick, visiting the prisoner—are things which *anyone* can do. It is not so much a question of giving away thousands of dollars, or of leading great movements for social change, or of writing our names in the annals of history; rather, it is a case of giving simple, human help to the people we meet every day. Thus, this parable opens wide the way to glory to so many of us ordinary people.^{viii}

[And not only are we to live out this gospel in relationship to others but also, whether we are sheep or goats, as it were, we are called to be true to, and within, ourselves. Listen to Carl Jung on this:

“The acceptance of oneself is the essence of the whole moral problem and the epitome of a whole outlook in life. That I feed the hungry, that I forgive an insult, that I love my enemy in the name of Christ—all these are undoubtedly great virtues. What I do unto the least of my brethren, that I do unto Christ. But what if I should discover that the least amongst them all, the poorest of all the beggars, the most impudent of all the offenders, the very enemy himself—that these are within me, and that I myself stand in need of the alms of my own kindness—that I myself am the enemy who must be loved?”^{ix]}

ⁱ 1 Corinthians 15:28; Ephesians 1:23

ⁱⁱ Quoted in “Goat” and “Sheep” in *The Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism*, Ami Ronnberg and Kathleen Martin, eds., *The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images* (Cologne, Germany: TASCHEN, 2010), pp. 318, 320, and 322.

ⁱⁱⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, “Knowing Glances” in *The Preaching Life* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1993), p.136

^{iv} Ibid. pp.136-137

^v Ibid. pp. 137-138. As the observer of symbols adds,

“The eye receives and emits light, looks out and looks in, is a window on the soul and on the world, revealing and perceiving, seeing through and true. It can also see too much, or nothing at all. The eye illuminates, understands, expresses, protects, scorches and stares. We can feel truly known by the way another’s eyes take us in, and despair and sorrow at being ‘unseen.’ Loss [or regaining] of sight can lead to something healing or creative...to the ‘third eye’ of ‘inner sight,’...awareness...Going both ways, this can mean ‘there’s none so blind as those who will not see,’ or can refer to a ‘sight’ and consciousness that is more responsive to an inner [or deeper] vision than to sense perceptions. In matters of wisdom, ‘second sight’ has always been considered more accurate, or ‘visionary’ than the bodily eyes. An ‘eyewitness’ can be deceived, but the ‘blind eyes’ of Justice see the truth. So although the eye is traditionally associated with light, insight, intelligence, reason, and spiritual awareness, the inner eyes see with a nighttime vision and darker awareness, [even] into the wisdom of dreams and all the unconscious and emotional elements that also comprise full human understanding...This ‘light of the mind’ has been imaged as the ‘third eye,’ the ‘eye of Dharma’ in Buddhism, the ‘eye of Wisdom’ in Islam, the ‘eye of Shiva’ in Hinduism and the ‘eye of God’ in Christianity.

Seen more obliquely, the eye corresponds metaphorically to initiation, to fleeting visions of beauty, the spirits of things, the emotional center of a storm, the essentials of experience and the secrets of the soul...[and] there is much to be said for peripheral...vision...for keeping one eye in time, the other in the eternal and for exchanging the bright hawk-eyed discernment—or bedazzlement—of consciousness, for the dim and blurry reality of human awareness, expression and vulnerability...for the ‘Eye of the Heart’” (Quoted in “Eye” in The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images Ibid., pp. 352, 354).

^{vi} Taylor, Ibid. pp.138-139

^{vii} See Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC (London: Collins, 1973), p. 48.

^{viii} But we need to open our time and space for such interactions to happen—it just won’t work if we’ve hermetically sealed ourselves off from access to the poor and others in need in our work, home, church or community life.

^{ix} Carl G. Jung, Modern Man in Search of a Soul (Abingdon, Oxon, U.K.: Routledge, (first published in 1933) reprint 2005), pp. 240-241.

Finally, as the great 12th century philosopher Maimonides stated, *simply helping* comes in various forms, some more appropriate than others. Maimonides wrote of eight ways of giving “righteous acts of charity.” Each level, in his view, is progressively more virtuous: the first step is that one gives but reluctantly. The next step is that one gives less than is appropriate, but with a giving heart. One does it because it’s the minimum of justice – it’s charity. The third step is that one gives after being asked. The fourth is that one gives before being asked. The fifth step is that one gives in such a way that the donor does not know the identity of the recipient. The sixth step is that one gives in such a way that the recipient does not know the identity of the donor. The seventh step is that one gives in such a way that neither the donor nor the recipient knows the identity of the other. The last step illustrates the step up from charity to justice. Maimonides concludes, “Lastly, the eighth and most meritorious step of all, is to anticipate charity by preventing poverty; namely, to assist the poor, either by a considerable gift or loan of money or by teaching them trades, or by putting them in the way of business so that they may earn an honest livelihood and not be forced to the dreadful alternative of holding out a hand for charity.” And I would add a ninth, as it were, and that’s that people don’t get opportunity or freedom or equality or dignity as a gift or an act of charity. They only get these things in the act of *claiming* them through their own effort. So sometimes, as the saying goes, we give a fish; other times we teach others how to fish; but oftentimes we just need to help remove the obstacles - some of which are ourselves - and then get out of the way for people to just get to the water, as it were. And that is what we sheep or goats most often forget (See Mosheh ben Maimon (Moses Maimonides) Yad, Mattenot Aniyyim (10:7-12)).