

Thoughts on Christ the King

The passage I've just read is, I hope, a familiar one to all of us. Our collective approach to Christian living here at Good Shepherd Baptist Church and in our Evergreen Association is one that causes us to refer a lot to "the least of these." And yet, I was somewhat surprised to notice this week, this is only the second time that I have focused a sermon on this passage in my nearly 13 years among you, the other time being on Christ the King Sunday in my first year here, 2005. In part, I've probably focused on other passages on the last Sunday of "Year A" in the three-year lectionary cycle because this passage *is* so familiar. It's not terribly appealing for a preacher – or, at least, this preacher – to stand before you to tell you something he's quite sure you already know.

But the truth of the matter is that I don't think I have anything earth-shattering to say today. I've got a couple of things to pass on to you that I've noticed in relation to this story of Christ the King and the sheep and the goats. And I read some interesting things this week that shed some new light on this story for me and, I hope, for you as well in my retelling of them. But ultimately, the lesson of this story is a simple one: what we do in this life, especially how we react to those in need, matters. It matters to God, it matters to the world, and it matters to the quality of our own lives, the state, you might say, of our souls. So please indulge me in some thoughts on Christ the King and remember how much the Creator of All loves all of creation.

I want to begin with that very thought – the love of God for all God has made. While I remain convinced that no human mind can truly encompass the reality of God, my base line description of our Creator is that found in I John 4:8: God is love. Likewise, my understanding of the message of Jesus, his conflicts with the religious establishment of his time and his overturning of the tables in the Temple notwithstanding, is that of a love that extends even to enemies. So, as I've said in conjunction with Christ the King Sunday in the past, when we take up the image of Jesus as the Risen Ruler of All, we must remember that this is a reign of love.

As some of you all know, when Connie and I were in Washington, D.C., a couple of weeks ago, I made a return visit to the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, the largest Roman Catholic church in North America and, by some measurements, one of the ten largest Christian churches in the world. I'd been there many years ago and remembered being fascinated by the art, which is of a variety of styles to honor the many national traditions honoring Mary. I had forgotten how disturbing I found what is perhaps the focal artistic statement of the entire building. In the dome behind the altar, visible from much of the main level of the church, is a rendering of Christos Pantokrator, Christ the Ruler of All, resurrected and enthroned in glory. I included a reproduction of that image in this week's newsletter and it's reprinted this morning in your bulletin. Why was I disturbed? Well, to begin with, this resurrected Jesus is a White guy, blonde-haired, blue-eyed, and with a complexion lighter than mine. That's problematic. But what bothered me even more was the depiction of his demeanor. This is not the loving, laughing Jesus that I read in the New Testament. This is not Jesus, the friend of women and children. This is an angry, angry man. His still-pierced hands look to be raised, not in blessing but in preparation for delivering a blow. As I looked again at the massive and mighty figure, I thought, "If this was my vision of Christ, I'd run for the safety of Mary's skirts, too." As I've also said here before, I think in general, we Protestants give Mary short shrift but I think there's something amiss when millions of our fellow Christians give such

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devotion to Mary because they cannot love God as revealed in a Christ who is a figure of vengeance and punishment.

Of course, this morning's passage is one of those in the New Testament which gives rise to this fearsome image of Christ the King. And while I think that the central message of Jesus' story of the Last Judgement is indeed central to his whole message – that we should love God *and* neighbor – I also believe that to put too much literal emphasis on the metaphor of the story is a mistake. Human beings are not sheep or goats. Jesus, like Paul and like all good rabbis, employs metaphor and hyperbolic language to make his points. It is how his stories were remembered by his followers until they were written down and how the written versions have worked their way into the memories of the generation upon generation of those of us who no longer rely on oral tradition. And while the metaphors may be memorable, we must be careful not to enshrine them as literal truth.

In fact, several of the commentaries that I read this week suggest that our common interpretation of the metaphor of the sheep and the goats is flawed. Our New Revised Standard Version Bibles translate verse 32 as “All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate *people* one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats...” Other, older translations, though, say “...he will separate *them* one from another...” as does the original Greek of Matthew. This takes the emphasis off of a judgement of individuals and restores it to consideration of collectives, the way that Matthew recalls the beginning of the story, “All the nations will be gathered...” This is significant for a couple of reasons. First, it is a reminder that the story is not about those who are already following Jesus, the new Israel, but about his sheep in other pastures, the nations or Gentiles. In fact, if Jesus foresees the Church in this story at all, it is as “the least of these.” We must remember that the Gospel According to Matthew gives every indication of being written to encourage a church under persecution. Here, those followers of Jesus are being told that those outside their community will be judged in regards to how those “others” behave in relation to the poor and persecuted church. In that regard, the story has less to say to us than to the persecuted church across the ages.

But where this understanding of the metaphor as a collective one does impact us is in our status as members of collectives; nations, say, or institutions. Bruce Epperly has some enlightening things to say in this regard. Rev. Epperly is currently Professor of Practical Theology at Lancaster Theological Seminary as well as Pastor of South Congregational Church, Centerville, MA, and is regarded as one of the leading process theologians in the United States. He writes: “We need also to note the political and economic dimensions of Matthew 25. The coming Christ is speaking to the “nations” and although nations are made of people – some even think corporations are people! – institutions can turn toward or against God's way. Nations are judged not by military power but in power that feeds the hungry, gives comfort to the thirsty, upbuilds the marginalized. The concern about those in prison is a challenge for us to ensure that the legal system is just and that our prisons become places of healing and reformation not profit making holding systems, giving no hope to their inmates. Politics is at the heart of Jesus' ministry and nothing could be further from God's realm than disregard for the most vulnerable members of our society. There is no place for rugged individualism or amoral concern for profit in God's realm; God's realm is ultimately the realm of Shalom where individuals and nations place justice and compassion at the heart of governmental policy.”

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This is where those of us who share in our nation's affluence and ability to worship freely must hear our call in preparing the way for the apocalyptic vision of our Redeemer. Despite the way in which our democracy has been pushed toward plutocracy, the rule of the rich, and some would even say kleptocracy, the rule of thieves, we still have the power of the vote to influence national policy. How is our nation responding to those in need? How are we doing in caring for the hungry or those without shelter? Is our health care system as effective for the poor as for the rich? Are our prisons places of reform and restoration or merely of punishment and degradation? And how is the justice system which determines who goes to prison and for how long and who walks free? Are we really a nation of "liberty and justice for all" or merely for those who can afford it?

Likewise, those in the workforce or those whose retirement investments have made them shareholders have a voice in corporate policymaking. Is the bottom line only the bottom line or do the corporations in which we have influence pay attention to their impact on the communities they serve, and on the environment? Even if we are only engaged as consumers, we can still make companies pay attention to us through communication campaigns and boycotts. Even as individuals, we must seek to have impact on the collectives to which we belong.

I struggle with the idea that some number of the nations will be sent into "eternal punishment" no less than I did when I preached on this passage in 2005. As I said then, I can only account for this concept in view of the love of God by believing that this, too, is metaphorical. As I've also noted many times before, the term "eternal life" is literally translated as "life of the Age." I understand this to mean that the blessed, because of their understanding of the imperatives of love, are living now as if they were living in the age of fulfillment, as if they were already living in the Kingdom of God. I also noted twelve years ago that while the sheep are called "blessed by my Father," the goats are merely called "You that are accursed." God does not curse the goats; they have cursed themselves by living life blind to the needs of those around them. Is this, in and of itself, the punishment of the Age to Come? Again, what Bruce Epperly writes strikes a deep chord for me: "There is judgment for the complacent and unconcerned in Matthew 25. While the gulf between the sheep and the goats is not irreversible, the pain felt by the goats involves recognizing missed opportunities to care for the vulnerable and contribute something of beauty to God's experience. Perhaps, the pain will be redemptive and they too will be restored to companionship with God and the vulnerable. Their pain may be a wakeup call to behavioral change." I can only pray it will be so.

Epperly's musings on the reality behind the metaphor of "eternal punishment," combined with the idea that we can, with the grace of God, have an impact on the nations and institutions of our world, gives me hope on this Sunday of Christ the King. It reminds me that the Reign of Christ need not be a crisis of vengeance and punishment but the world-changing opportunity of love, even for those who have been the worst transgressors against the vision of God for God's world. I was further reminded of this on Friday night, when I attended the opening of Taproot Theatre Company's mainstage Christmas show, "A Civil War Christmas: An American Musical Celebration." I will not spoil the event for those of you who may yet see the play before it closes on December 30. As you might expect, being set in that bloody and awful time, with a biracial cast telling the stories of those on both sides of the Potomac River on the night of Christmas Eve,

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1864, there is a rich mixture of emotion evoked: anger, joy, despair, hope; all accompanied by both tears and laughter. But a significant line, repeated by two very different characters, is all about hope. Playwright Paula Vogel presents this as her central vision: “The hope of peace is sweeter than peace itself.” And while our hope for and in Christ’s shalom may not be sweeter than the fulfilment of shalom, it is enough to sustain us and empower us to work for that realization when Christ rules in every heart in every nation.

For that reign of Christ, our King, for the love of God and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, thanks be to God. Amen.