

Ascension Lutheran Church

Pastor Godkin's Sermon for the week of November 23, 2008

The Only Thing That Counts is Faith Expressing Itself Through Love (Matthew 25:31-46)

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Our text is from the 25th chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew:

“Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’”

This is the text.

Dear friends in Christ, this is the Last Sunday in the Church Year. Next week begins a new year with Advent. And so it makes good sense that on this Last Sunday in the Church Year we talk about the Last Day in history, the Day when Christ returns. Jesus gives us a picture of that day in our text. It's a picture of animals, sheep and goats to be specific. On that day it says the Good Shepherd will separate them and the sheep will go on His right, and the goats on His left. This is a picture of the Day of Judgement. And no, the sheep and the goats are not on trial for how well they grazed in the pastures, how much green grass they ate or how much wool and milk they produced. This is a Judgement for all the nations. The sheep and the goats represent the people of the earth.

Friends, this picture of sheep and goats is a good description of people. Let's begin with the sheep. In many places the Bible describes the people of God as sheep. “The Lord is my Shepherd” we hear in Psalm 23. Jesus says “I am the Good Shepherd” who “lays down His life for the sheep” in John 10. And in Ezekiel 34 the Lord says, “‘You are my sheep, human sheep of my pasture, and I am your God’, declares the Lord GOD.” The Bible uses this image of sheep and their shepherd because it describes very well our relationship with our Lord. What are some of the characteristics of sheep? Sheep listen to their shepherd, and they follow him. They look to him for all their needs because without him they would suffer. Without a shepherd sheep are prone to be attacked; they easily stray from the pen and get into dangerous situations. When we think of sheep they are by and large gentle, quiet and easily led. Sheep love to graze as well. They love to feed in the green pastures. They are not in a hurry to move on and will stay as long as the shepherd allows them. Friends, this means that the sheep of God's pasture love to spend time with Him. They love to eat the Word of God; to be in His presence.

Now let's look at the goats. Goats aren't particular about what they eat. They will eat almost anything. They nibble here and there and sample different bushes and leaves. Because they don't graze and don't particularly like the parameters of the sheep pen they tend to wander. Goats are more headstrong, more aggressive – they like to buck

heads with each other. And unlike sheep that look to the shepherd for guidance, a goat will often try to escape the sheep pen. Goats tend to be stubborn and want to do their own thing. These represent people who may like to nibble on God's Word but also nibble here and there on the false teachings in the world. Essentially, the image of goats we have here represents those who resist and reject Jesus as the Good Shepherd, King, and Saviour.

How do we tell the sheep from the goats in this world? Sheep and goats look fairly similar at first glance. Jesus gives us the answer in the Sermon on the Mount. He says, "By their fruit you will recognize them" (Mt. 7:16). He says in John 13, "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another". This idea of love can be really quite vague in our day and age. Is it romance? Is it friendship? Is it sacrificial love where we give something from our self to help our neighbour in need? Here in our text we see the kind of love Jesus is talking about. He says, "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me."

Friends, there is a saying that 'no one cares what you know until they know that you care.' If we were to talk endlessly about Jesus' love but never show evidence of His love in us people would view our faith as empty and it would not ring true. As Romans 2:23-24 says, "You who brag about the law, do you dishonour God by breaking the law? It says, 'God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.'"

Friends, this is a message for all of us who profess the name of Christ. The world is watching. They're looking for authentic Christianity; they are looking for proof of our faith. And so is Christ Himself looking. Our Lord says in Luke 18, "When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?" When paramedics check to see whether someone is alive or not they take the person's pulse. The works we do are the pulse of our spiritual life. If you help someone in need, if you pray for someone in need (not just for your friends but for those who may irritate you too), if you forgive each other from the heart and wipe the slate clean just as Christ forgave you, this shows that God's mercy lives in you and through you; it shows your life in Christ, that you have a spiritual pulse. As Galatians 6 says, "The only that counts is faith expressing itself through love."

As Jesus says in Matthew 5, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy" and what mercy it is! The Judge buries all His people's failures and remembers only their deeds of mercy. To those on His right Jesus mentions only the good things they had done in faith. There is no mention of their past sins because these were laid on Jesus. He did away with them on the cross. We enter eternal life not because they are pretty good but because Christ paid for our sins. But sadly, those on His left who did not know Jesus as Saviour, they are still in their sins and they must pay the penalty of eternal punishment.

Friends, when we do works of mercy we must keep our thoughts in check. Notice the attitude of those who are on the right side of Jesus in the parable. They essentially said 'when did we do these good things?' They weren't thinking about a reward. They were

only thinking how they could show the compassion of Jesus to their neighbour. This is what made it a good work. As our Lord says in Matthew 6, "When you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing". We don't need to pat ourselves on the back or look for praise from our friends, our reward is in heaven and through Christ we have a gracious Saviour.

He has prepared a Kingdom for His people. The King says to those on His right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world."

Friends, He does not want anyone to perish but everyone to come to repentance so they might live with Him. God's heart is mercy and He wants all people to enter His Kingdom. As Jesus says, "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him" (Jn. 3:17). It is an incredible place. Words cannot fully describe it. It is full of joy, peace and life. It is paradise.

In this world people plan for things like vacations down to the last detail – which hotel to stay in, which airline to fly on...which food to eat and this lasts only a couple of weeks or so. But sadly, not many plan for what's really important – eternity. Our lives are short. The Psalms say that our life is like a vapour of smoke, like a breath or a fleeting shadow. Since we have only a short time in this life - 70, 80, 90 years or so, let us keep our eyes fixed on the mercy of Christ – His mercy for us on the cross and His compassion for the world. May the Lord use us as instruments of His compassion to those around us and present opportunities to share the Gospel so many may come to the fold of His Kingdom and know Jesus as Saviour. Amen. The peace of God that surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.