Sunday, 11/22/20

**Matthew 25:31-46**

31“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. 32All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. 33He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

34“Then the King will say 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. 35For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, 36I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

37“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? 38When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? 39When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

40“The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’

41“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. 42For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’

44“They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’

45“He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’

46“Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

**Sermon**

The holiday season has officially started. Three days ago the Thanksgiving baskets were given out, which means that Thanksgiving is this week, and Advent starts next Sunday. That means the Christmas music starts in earnest on Friday. (It’s already started on the radio, but there’s bound to be more soon. Right now you’re probably either cheering or gritting your teeth on the inside.) Before that comes probably the least-anticipated Sunday of the church year: Christ the King Sunday. One more apocalyptic story about the end of the world before the more comforting stories from Advent and Christmas. Today’s story is at least familiar to most people. It reminds me of a local pastor who came to talk to an Intervarsity group I was part of as a college student. It was near the end of a semester, and before the meeting started we were talking about final exams. A student commented to the pastor that he must feel relieved not to have any finals to worry about; the pastor, who already had a Ph.D., responded by saying, “No, I only have one final exam coming, and I already know that I passed.”

It’s a funny story and I’ve always admired that pastor’s certainty, but today’s story should make us think about what’s required to “pass the test.” In one sense, reading this passage is like discovering that you’re going into a test with very high stakes, armed with the teacher’s answer key. We approach the beginning of the New Testament’s story next week after seeing the end, in which the Son of Man—a phrase Jesus used for himself, with echoes of the book of Daniel—coming in glory, seated on a throne, surrounded by glory and accompanied by angels, gathering all the nations to himself to be sorted into those who inherit the kingdom prepared for them and those who are sent to the eternal fire. Jesus is a king writ large, and the stakes of this test are higher than any I’ve ever taken, but the answer key is straightforward: did you feed the sick, cloth the naked, and visit the isolated, or did you neglect them? However you treat the vulnerable around you, that’s how you treat Jesus himself.

I’ve read this story many times and never realized that everybody—the sheep and the goats—seems not to have realized that they were encountering Jesus seemingly every day. That the “goats” who failed to take the need to help seriously didn’t recognize him in those they didn’t help isn’t surprising. Even the sheep, who have taken the time to help those around them, are caught off guard by the revelation that every encounter they have with someone in need is an encounter with Jesus. The appearance of the Son of Man may fit the bill for a king, but this is an unusual kind of kingship. Modern Bible readers usually have abstract notions of what kings are, but we understand well enough what powerful rulers are like: too often they use power for their own benefit with little consideration for the people they rule. A line from a movie has stuck in my mind: “Those who gain power fear losing it.” That’s played out in American society in all kinds of ways in recent months. Jesus’s kingship looks much different.

* Identification with “the least of these”
* Calls them brothers and sisters
* His demands
  + Feed, give water, invite in, clothe, treat illness, visit
  + The theme: the suffering are lifted up, not the powerful
  + Take care of them in tangible ways, not just by discussing/wishing well
  + No mention of doctrine, ritual purity, honor, etc.

Jesus tells this parable during Holy Week, shortly before Judas agrees to betray him to the Romans and the religious authorities. He’s going to the cross soon after he tells this story, so making this point is important to him.

* He’s God, become human, submitting to persecution and death
* He dies for our sins, shows mercy, we join him in resurrection
* We as followers should do the same

Our ability to follow this teaching

* Why do we struggle with this?
  + Discomfort—don’t want to get involved
  + Mentality of pulling yourself up by the bootstraps
  + Busyness
  + Consumerism
* What does it look like
  + Mercy: actually alleviating pain
  + Relationship-building
  + Seeing Christ in someone else—don’t just help to make yourself feel good