

November 26, 2017
25th Sunday after Pentecost - Christ the King
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, IA 52101
Rev. Amy Zalk-Larson
Preacher: Rev. Marion Pruitt-Jefferson

First Reading: Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Psalm 95:1-7a; Second Reading: Ephesians 1:15-23;
Gospel: Matthew 25:31-46

Beloved of God, Grace and peace to you from Jesus, our Good Shepherd.

Well here we are again this morning with yet another parable of judgment. These are such difficult stories to listen to. The judgement is so harsh and the punishment is so severe. Yet the experience of having been judged and found wanting feels familiar to us.

It starts in early childhood, when we begin to assert our independence and learn the meaning of the word “No.” It expands rapidly when we enter school and notice that our friend got a gold star on her paper and we only got a check mark. We are put in groups for math and reading, and even though our groups have cute little names that don’t appear to be hierarchical, we quickly discern that the goldfish are in fact better than the tetras.

We learn very early about the separation for the sheep from the goats.

The judgment and competition increase as we get older. We go out for the team – we are assigned chairs in band and orchestra - we try out for the play – audition for the choir – take the ACT and the SAT and we wonder if our performance is good enough, if our scores are good enough – if we are good enough....

As we grow into adulthood the competition becomes stiffer and the judgments more consequential. We’re set loose in the consumer driven marketplace, and quickly discover just how stiff and harsh the separation of the sheep from the goats can be. We apply for a job and receive a letter from personnel thanking us for our interest but indicating that our qualifications don’t meet their needs at this time. We seek advancement in our place of work and we’re overlooked. We work for years at one company and then are told our position has been eliminated and the company is moving to Mexico.

Even our entertainment is laden with judgment and competition. Reality TV shows are designed to weed out the weak from the strong – to separate the stunningly beautiful from the merely attractive, to set the sharp and the shrewd against the slower and less cunning. If you don’t measure up your voted off the show, eliminated from the cast. And somehow this feels entertaining to us?

And if all of these cultural voices of judgment weren’t enough – many of us do battle daily with our inner critic – that voice in our heads that is continually evaluating everything about us and that refuses to ever be satisfied with who we are.

And then we come to worship – believing as we’ve been told our whole life that this is a place of welcome, a place of unconditional love and forgiveness, a place of belonging. And then we are confronted with this stark and powerful story of judgment. The sheep are separated from the

goats. The sheep are blessed and inherit the kingdom. The goats are condemned and sent off to eternal punishment.

It is a deeply disturbing story. And when we hear it, it's only natural for us to wonder, am I a sheep or am I a goat? Or maybe, at least in my case, when I hear the king recite those 6 acts of compassion and mercy: I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was naked and you clothed me, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me, I know I don't belong among the sheep. I know that I have not given freely of my resources or even my own hours in service to those who live on the margins of society. And yet I do believe the good news that I shared with the children a moment ago, that we are indeed God's beloved sheep and that we belong to God's flock. Maybe you share a similar response to this story. So what are we to do?

Well, if we persist in focusing our attention on the sheep and the goats and their respective fates, we will experience only guilt and fear and despair. But the surprise for us here is that the sheep and the goats are not the main characters in this story. The King who is the great Shepherd of the Sheep is the central character of this story, and because of that there is HOPE for us.

This story of the final judgment is the very last parable that Jesus' tells in Matthew's gospel. What follows immediately after this is Jesus' passion – his suffering, death and resurrection. Jesus who began his life as a refugee fleeing from the hatred of King Herod, now ends his life as a condemned criminal. Jesus who spent his entire life healing the sick, feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, eating with outcasts and sinners, now dies as one of them, rejected and cast out. And because of that we can live in hope.

The first words of this parable are “when the Son of Man comes in glory.” Immediately after this parable concludes, Jesus turns towards Jerusalem, and his next words to his disciples are “the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.” You see the “glory of the Son of Man” is not a mighty throne from which people are condemned. The “glory of the Son of Man” is the Cross. There the One who comes to judge the nations is himself judged. There we see that the Son of Man is in fact the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. He is the One foretold by the prophet Ezekiel who announces: I myself will shepherd my sheep...I will gather them in from all the places they've wandered, I will feed them on good pasture, I will bind up their wounds and strengthen their weakness, and I will make them to lie down in peace and safety.

Beloved, the judgment has been rendered, and by the grace and mercy of God, we have been found to be the people of God's pasture and the sheep of God's hand. Our Good Shepherd has drawn us to himself, and here at this table he feeds us with his own life – on the good pasture of forgiveness, mercy and love. Filled with our Shepherd's love, we are set free to bear that love to all the suffering world.