

The Good Shepherd

Matthew 25:31-46

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I.

The Gospel Year ends here, on Reign of Christ Sunday, with a light Sebastopol rain and days that darken in the late afternoon. In the liturgical calendar, today is the last Sunday of the year, which began with Advent 2016. Reign of Christ Sunday affords us this little window between Ordinary Time and Advent, a little breathing space. Our modern American culture's message is that this is also the time for consuming, buying, rushing. A few years ago at this time of year, Target ran an ad campaign for its branded credit cards, and the tag line was "Buy more stuff." It's a stark contrast with the breathing space, the quiet in-between- liminal space of the church's liturgical calendar.

In the Benedictine tradition, there are monastics who practice something called *statio*. *Statio* means to pause on purpose; it's the spiritual custom of finishing one task before beginning another. Sister Joan Chittister, a Benedictine nun, describes how her novice mistress insisted that the sisters in training be in the chapel five minutes before the bell rang for prayer- which was not necessarily what Sister Joan Chittister wanted to do. She writes, "think of all the things that could have been done in that additional five minutes a day....Work, valuable work, could have been done and I could still have made it on time for prayer." But she came to understand that "the practice of *statio* is meant to center us and make us conscious of what we're about to do and make us present to the God who is present to us." In many ways, Reign of Christ is

the *statio* Sunday of the Christian calendar– this is that day when we take a breath and finish the year, before beginning afresh with the season of Advent.

Frequently called the “Parable of the Sheep and the Goats,” the Gospel reading for today appears in the Book of Matthew as the third in a trio of parables. Sometimes it’s useful to see what comes before and after a reading. After the Parable of the Sheep and Goats, we hear these words from Jesus: “You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.” So our Gospel reading is actually another ending– as we read it, we mark the ending of the church year, but in the text it’s the ending of the teaching parables of Jesus. Or at least it’s the last teaching parable before this man called Jesus becomes a parable himself. We read it on Reign of Christ Sunday, when we consider Christ’s kin-dom and our part in bringing it about.

Maybe you heard it in our scripture reading, but Reign of Christ Sunday also has apocalyptic connotations; pointing to the end-times when the kin-dom of Jesus will be fully realized to the ends of the earth. The Son of Man “comes in his glory, and all the angels with him,” separating people in judgment, based on their actions (or inactions). Christ invites forward the sheep, those who have done well– “you fed me when I was hungry, clothed me when I was naked, visited me when I was in prison, and cared for me when I was sick.” The people are astonished, wondering when they had done these things for Christ, and he answers, “when you did these things for the least, the lowly, the unloved, you did them for me.” And then come the goats. These complicit bystanders to injustice who fail to act, go away into “eternal punishment” and the “righteous into eternal life.” Neither the metaphorical sheep nor the goats even realize that they had opportunities to serve their king, they were just going about their business.

II.

The thing is, so often we are just going about our business too. When we read this parable, we're left wondering whether we'd be a sheep or a goat in the end? Are we unwittingly complicit in someone's oppression?— I think we should just go with, Yes. From potentially buying clothes that might have been made in sweatshops to consuming vegetables from farms where we don't know the working conditions to forgetting to bring a reusable water bottle and instead purchasing a disposable plastic water bottle that we know will end up in that giant trash island in the ocean (have you heard about that? It's pretty horrifying actually!)... I'd estimate that just living our daily American life contributes to the degradation of people and the planet, without us thinking too much about it. And then— when we drive past the person outside the grocery store with the sign asking for money— are we one of the goats, a bystander who does nothing to help?

This very question is one that has spoken to me for many years now. Back in college I remember debating this text with a friend who happens to have become a famous country singer. In a class on Religion and Politics in Latin America, I argued with her that standing by and doing nothing when you know atrocities are happening around you, is as bad as committing the atrocity itself. And I used this scripture as part of my argument. She was not persuaded. But now she does duets with people like Bon Jovi, so I think she's probably gotten over it. Research keeps coming out, maybe you've read this too, that bystanders have a ton of power when they see a bully harming someone else. Bystanders—if they are silent, communicate approval of the action they're observing. Maybe Jesus is onto something in this parable, calling out the downfall of complicity.

But there's also this great sorting of sheep and goats into two opposing groups that can be bothersome—it seems so dualistic. I know it's ancient imagery but this judgmental shepherd leaves me feeling sorry for the goats. Some of you may know that my family has a couple of pet goats who will walk on a leash (sometimes stubbornly), but who do a great job of weed control. So I readily admit to having a soft spot for the goats here. And in this case it's not the use of degrading goat imagery that bothers me so much as the outcome of what happens to the goats. Where is the shepherd's compassion here? What I mean to say is, if this parable advocates seeing the face of Christ in the "other," in the hungry and oppressed, even in the prisoner; what about the people who are portrayed as goats? Can't we see the face of Christ in them too? How glorious can this throne of the Son of Man be, if it's based on judgment that leads to exclusion? What kind of a Good Shepherd chooses favorites like that and sends part of his flock to its eternal demise? Maybe our sermon title for this morning should have a question mark after it— the Good Shepherd— question mark?

III.

But before we get carried away with punctuation around here, we have to remind ourselves that parables tend to rebel against simple, allegorical interpretation. As Theologian Frederick Buechner says, "parables are a small story with a large point. Most of the ones Jesus told have a kind of sad fun about them." The goats, the sheep, the judgmental shepherd, the hungry and the ones who offer food— these archetypes are within all of us. So what deeper truths might Jesus be alluding to here?

First, Jesus is making a theological statement about the nature of God. Jesus is saying that God is not some far-away being who sits above the clouds, or out in the mysterious far reaches of the universe. God is here, as close as our breath. God is in

the messiness and uncertainty of human life. God is here, particularly in our neighbor. You want to see the face of God? Look into the face of one of the least of these, the vulnerable, the weak, the children. God is right here.

Second, Jesus is making a relational statement about how we are to care for one another in our lives. The progressive church's understanding of social justice and a preferential option for the poor has its foundation in this text- they emphasize seeing the face of Christ in the "other," the "least of these." They ask worthy questions like, "What do I discover about God when I encounter someone who suffers?" Movements have been built on this text- the Social Gospel of the early 20th century, Dorothy Day's Catholic Worker Movement, much of Liberation Theology. Religious Historian Elaine Pagels says Jesus' words are the basis for a radical new social structure based on the God-given dignity and value of every human being. We are not to degrade, abuse and humiliate others- because Jesus is there with them in their humanity. We care for one another because we are connected in the web of life, and the sacred is ever-present in that relationality.

Third, we are to give ourselves away in love, in the name of Jesus Christ, because to love is to live. Presbyterian Pastor John Buchanan says, "God wants to save our souls and redeem us and give us the gift of life-true, deep, authentic human life. God wants to save us by touching our hearts with love. God wants to save us by persuading us to care and see other human beings who need us. God wants to save us from obsessing about ourselves, our own needs, by persuading us to forget about ourselves and worry about others." Our response to injustice matters, because it gives life, and because we play an important part in bringing about Christ's kin-dom of love and justice.

IV.

Maybe the practice of *statio*, purposely ending one activity before beginning another, prepares us to take action on behalf of the vulnerable least of these. Maybe *statio* helps us to realize that we are among the “least of these” in need of care and mercy. Maybe *statio* affords us a breathing space to consider where we’ve been and where we intend to go, to set our intention more decisively. If we are going to be living signs of resurrection, if we are going to be part of the resistance to oppression in our country, if we are going to see the face of Christ in others, if we are going to prepare the way of the Lord in Advent, we need to be really ready. This Reign of Christ Sunday, I invite you to get really ready by taking a deep breath. Inhaling, behold all that the past year has been for you—and exhaling, let it all the way out, and pause before your next inhale. That pause was like a brief *statio*. Now we are prepared to begin afresh, holding Jesus’ vision of justice and care for the most vulnerable as we move into Advent.

Pastoral Prayer

God of compassion: Hear our prayer.

Let us pray: God of sorting and of all sorts, We come to you this morning With the hope of the world in our hearts, and with the hope of the world on our shoulders.

We pray that our hearts and minds be so open and filled with your presence that we might live with reckless compassion, offering what we have without judgment to the least of these we meet everyday, in every way.

May we be so bold and confident in your grace that we give without expectation, love without reserve, and bear witness without fear.

We long to be your disciples, we long to bring forth your reign on your earth. On this day where we place our hope in your reign, We pray for the places and peoples ravaged by all that is unruly and unreigned~ war, disease, suffering and illness brought on by human greed and cruelty and ignorance...

(silent prayer)

We pray for the places and peoples closer to us, who ache from loss, loneliness, depression, addiction, isolation and fear...

(silent prayer)

We pray for our community around us, for relationships that need healing, structures that need changing, for the efforts ongoing for peace and harmony.

We pray for your rule, O Christ, to rule our hearts and minds and actions.

In the name of all that is holy, Amen.

Benediction

Now let us live out the Reign of Christ in the week ahead, letting love, justice, and compassion fill our lives, our community, our world. Amen.