

## *Church in the Wild: A Different Kind of King*

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Matthew 25: 31 – 46

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The Community Church of Sebastopol, United Church of Christ  
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Reign of Christ Sunday, also called Christ the King Sunday, was instituted by Pope Pius XI following World War I.

The year was 1925, and Pope Pius imagined a new dominion ruled by a King of Peace who would reconcile the nations.

That same year, fascism was on the rise in Europe, Scopes was arrested for teaching evolution, and the KKK had 5 million known members.

If there was ever a year it was important to assert the coming realm of one who came not to be served, but to serve, 1925 was that year.<sup>1</sup>

Reign of Christ marks the end of the Christian liturgical calendar.

The year begins anew next week on the first Sunday of Advent.

The great womanist theologian Delores Williams claimed that Christ's kingship must be understood in light of the incarnation.

In other words, the "King of Kings" is also "poor little Mary's boy."

These two refrains must be sung back and forth, a call and response.

Williams said this is the sound of "the Black church doing theology."

This the sound of harmony and dissonance, the song of a different kind of king altogether.

### I.

What kind of king do we encounter in today's gospel reading, known either as "The Judgment of the Nations" or the "Parable of the Sheep and the Goats"?

There are some clues in the text, which begins, "When the Son of Man comes in his glory."

The patriarchal title 'Son of Man' comes from the Book of Daniel and means simply the Human One or the Child of Humanity.

So, the first thing we know about the king in Jesus parable is that this person is human.

Not an angel, not a beast, nor a vapid diaphanous ghost, but flesh and blood like you and me.

Secondly, we know that this king is a shepherd, which, if you think about it, is all kinds of strange.

A shepherd was not someone with a lot of status in the ancient world.

A shepherd herded sheep on the outskirts of town, on the margins of society.  
And yet shepherd was a metaphor used by the prophets to describe leaders.  
Good shepherd leaders maintained a safe and healthy flock.  
Bad shepherd leaders neglected their well-being.  
In Jesus' final parable, the final judgment is made not by a celestial being but by a  
flesh and blood child of humanity who is a shepherd, tasked with the well-being of the  
nations.

From these opening lines, we get the sense that this is a different kind of king.  
And perhaps a different kind of judge.  
And yet the parable's clear-cut, sheep v. goats, sorting process feel ungracious,  
unambiguous, and unrelenting.

## II.

The parable seems to echo our own human tribalism, the way we like to divvy people  
up into groups and judge them, even condemn them, whether overtly or politely.  
Our recent election has exposed these rifts in our society even more than before.  
Efforts to disenfranchise the votes of thousands, or tens of thousands, of voters, mostly  
people of color, feel like attempts weed out the goats and send them to hell.  
A judge must be just, which means the judge must see the whole picture and make a  
judgment based on the well-being of all involved.  
Clearly our racist and misogynist politics are the worst kind of judgmentalness.

In ancient Israel, the prophets were the uncredentialed yet divinely authorized critics  
of the unjust judges and the corrupt kings.  
Jesus stood in this line of prophets.  
According to Matthew's gospel, Jesus was the "New Moses" who came to liberate  
Israel and all the nations by way of a "New Exodus."  
He came to establish a new kind of government, one based in humility rather than  
hubris, compassion rather than competition, justice rather than jostling for power.

## III.

At first glance, the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats appears to simply repeat the  
unfair, judgmental, black and white ways of dividing up the world.  
It seems to suggest that if you follow the king's orders you'll be rewarded with eternal  
life, and if not, you'll be punished for all eternity.  
But would the Jesus you know tell a parable with that as the conclusion?  
Of course not.  
If we look closer, we find that Jesus, in this parable, like a clever trickster, is upending  
and subverting our ways of thinking about what is of ultimate importance.

When Jesus tells this parable, he is on the Mount of Olives, overlooking Jerusalem. He is talking to his disciples and answering their questions about how they are going to carry on without him.

“What will be required of us?” they are asking. “How shall we live in the here and now?”

And he answers that question with three parables.

The first one we heard two weeks ago, the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids, and Jesus’ answer to the question, “How shall we live in the here and now?” was live a “mindful, joyful life.”

Last week we heard the second parable, The Parable of the Talents, and Jesus’ answer to the question, “How shall we live in the here and now?” was live a “daring, fruitful life.”<sup>ii</sup>

Today’s parable answers the same question with “live a generous, compassionate life.”

Consider what the king commends in the sheep: acts of justice, mercy, and love. And these aren’t grand gestures.

They are simple loving acts that require few to no resources.

Give hungry people some food. Give thirsty people something to drink. Welcome strangers. Give clothes to those who need them. Take care of sick people. Visit people in prison.

Often, these are kinds of things that no one ever notices.

And if they are noticed, people who do them habitually don’t do them to get accolades.

These are humble tasks, without fanfare.

Every person is capable of these acts of justice, mercy, and love.

And it’s interesting to note that inheriting the kingdom has nothing to do with believing things, going to church, or even professing Jesus’ name.

Still, isn’t the text saying that in order to gain the king’s favor, you have to do these things, placing a huge, stressful obligation on all of us to be do-gooders all the time. Actually, no. That’s not what the text says.

Here’s where Jesus gets really tricky.

When he summons the sheep, the king says: “inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”

In other words, the sheep don’t earn the kingdom by their good works.

The sheep do good works because that’s who God created them to be.

This idea, sometimes called predestination, radically changes the way we think about serving others.

We don't, and can't, serve others to gain anything for ourselves.  
When we serve we are simply echoing the blessing God has placed at the center of our lives.  
This means that when we do something just or merciful or loving for someone else, there is no reason to boast.  
God enabled this kindness and we, like St. Francis said, are merely instruments.

Humble acts done without boasting, but there is one more way in which this parable turns the world upside down.

The sheep are surprised that they've done anything of significance.

They are not aware of having fed the hungry or cared for the sick.

It seems that their actions were done for their own sake, or for the sake of those whom they are serving.

But it also puts the rest of us in a bind.

We now know too much.

Now we know that when we give drink to the thirsty or visit prisoners we are doing so for the child of humanity.

And if we know, then we can't be sheep, because the sheep are unaware.

Which is Jesus' way of keeping his disciples, and us, from assuming that we are, or can become sheep.

The best we can do is admire the actions of the sheep, and pray that we, too, may receive God's mercy and love that the story celebrates.

"But what about the goats?" you're asking.

Doesn't this story definitively declare that many won't make the grade and will be given not "eternal life" but "eternal fire"?

No, it doesn't.

What the story conveys is that salvation is God's business and not ours.

As soon as we start dividing sheep from goats, we usurp what belongs to God alone.

In this sense, with regard to salvation, we must remain agnostic. We cannot know.

But that also means we cannot know that anyone will be sent to the eternal fire.

After all, Jesus introduces us to a God of mercy and love, a God of forgiveness, a God who seeks out the lost in order to save, a God who rescues those in despair.

With this God in mind, we should pray for ourselves and for others, including those most lost, for this parable is a stern warning against looking down on any person or group.

This parable is a call to loving service and humility.

Would it not be preposterous, then, to place ourselves in the position of the judge?

#### IV.

This parable is about the end of time, but Jesus tells it to clarify how we are to live in the here and now.

This parable represents Jesus' final words to his disciples before he enters Jerusalem for the last time.

Before emptying himself on the cross, he describes a different kind of king and a different kind of kingdom.

This is why you hear your pastors often refer to a kin-dom rather than a kingdom. Because Jesus' kingdom is nothing like kingdoms of the world based on domination and patriarchy.

Jesus kingdom is a kin-dom where people realize they belong to one another.

It is a kin-dom of servanthood, of kindness, and of compassion.

This is the different kind of kingdom and the different kind of king to which the church bears witness.

For the church on the eve of Advent, this parable is an exhortation to serve, not in grand and vainglorious ways, but in simple, everyday acts of justice, mercy, and love. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Based on a quote by Silas Henderson found in an article by Libby Howe in the November 4, 2020 edition of *The Christian Century*.

<sup>ii</sup> Many of the insights in this sermon are based on a blog by saltproject.org on Reign of Christ the King Sunday (Year A).