

“The Lamb’s Fold”

a sermon based on
Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24 & Matthew 25:31-46

and delivered on
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Christ the King Sunday (Year B)

at
Cherry Valley United Methodist Church

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Today if you noticed both passages from Scripture talk about sheep, but more importantly about judgment: God's judgment in particular. In the modern day United Methodist Church, we don't talk about judgement much. It makes us uncomfortable. Isn't that something that anti-intellectual fundamentalists talk about? Not us "enlightened" Christians? Right?

But here it is in Scripture. Not just here, but several places. That means that we have to address it, especially if we are indeed enlightened and have open minds. We should want to understand this message, not only for our sake and for those whom we love, but for all those whom (to paraphrase the beginning of that reading from Ezekiel) ... to understand for all those whom the Lord GOD searches wherever they have been scattered.

Let's look at what we hear in these words from Scripture. In Ezekiel the promises to search for his sheep that are scattered, the promises to judge them, and then comes the twist between the fat and the lean not favoring the fat. Why? Because the fat have grown fat as bullies, pushing aside the weak and causing them to scatter.

This is important. It's important for a few different reasons. First, it upsets – it turns over – what people knew which is that the fat sheep are to be preferred. They must be the good sheep because they've thrived. Right? It makes sense. This is important, because it gives us a clue to our own reluctance to talk about God's judgment. It sounds too much like the prosperity gospel's heretical teaching that you know you have favor with God by what you accumulated.

How are we to judge if not by worldly success? Just that question shows the problem. It's not how we'll judge, it's how Jesus Christ, King of kings and Host of hosts judges.\

In the example from Ezekiel, the judgment is between sheep. Some who thrive by bullying, and the others including those who've grown weak as a result of their oppression. Then when we turn to the Gospel, Jesus uses a different example. Here, the judgement is not between fat sheep and lean sheep, but between sheep and goats. Sheep and goats are different animals.

Whereas sheep eat pasture plants like grass and forbs (I had to look that up. Forbs are flowering plants.), goats prefer brush, tree bark, leaves, and even garbage (including tin cans if we believe cartoons; but not much of an exaggeration). Likewise, sheep and goats have different personalities. Sheep are generally content to trust their shepherd and to go where they're led. Goats, on the other hand, are obstinate ready to give a hearty butt in the butt when you turn your back.

That's what Jesus was pointing to – It's what Ezekiel was pointing to too – when they used these examples. We tend to get caught up on what sheep do differently from the goats, or maybe the fat sheep and lean sheep do differently; and in so doing, we miss the point.

Listen to what Jesus says about judgment for those on the right hand, "Come, you that are blessed," not "**will be**" not "*shall be*" blessed but "you that **are** blessed." Do you hear the distinction? Then comes the directive *inherit*. Take it, seize the kingdom of heaven, because you fed me when I was hungry, clothed me when I was naked, you comforted me when all was lost. The blessing isn't the inheritance, but who they are.

It's the same with those assigned to the left he says, "You that **are** accursed, depart..." He doesn't say you will be accursed because you didn't do these things, but that you didn't do them because that's your nature. Rather than tending to the needs of the hungry, you exploited them. Rather than clothe the naked, you turned away from them. Rather than comforting the hopeless, you shrugged.

There's a risk that when we hear these words about judgement that we'll fall into that state of works righteousness. "Good" Christians do this all the time. They say if we do enough things for the hungry, the thirsty, the naked and homeless, and the oppressed we'll please God. Don't get me wrong. Those things do please God, but they merely reveal the character of our soul.

In Matthew 7:15-16 Jesus says, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits." Just because one looks like a sheep, doesn't make one a sheep. Just because we go through the motions doesn't change our nature.

Likewise, when Jesus says, that "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven," (Mt. 7:21) he's not offering a checklist to get into heaven. It's about a transformed character, in which the actions match the inward nature.

Did you notice something about the sheep and the goats? Both those who were called blessed and those who were called accursed, did you notice? Did you notice, that when issued a directive to inherit heaven or to depart from God's presence because "When you saw me, you either did or didn't"? Did you notice that the sheep and the goats, the blessed and the accursed both asked the exact same question? "When was that? I don't remember."

In that question, "When was that?" you can almost hear what was unsaid, "If I'd known." Right? From the accursed, "If I'd known it was *you*, I would have acted differently." From the blessed, "If I'd known it was you, ...?" I don't know how to end that one. Do you? What would have been different?

What all of this tells us is this: God judges us not by what we've done. That's sort of the whole point of the cross. Isn't it? That we're not judged by what we've done, but by our relationship with Jesus Christ – and by being different when we allow him into our lives.

This is good news, because it frees us from worrying that I might have missed helping one hungry person, or one homeless person, or I felt helpless to give the right kind of comfort to a prisoner whether in actual prison or imprisoned by circumstances.

Maybe you've heard that old story about the girl walking along the beach and picking up starfish. As she picks up each one, she tosses it back into the sea. A man walking along asks what she's doing. (After all, shouldn't little girls collect starfish to decorate their pretty little bedrooms?) When she replies that she's saving starfish, the man snorts his retort, "You'll never save them all." Picking up another starfish and tossing into the surf, the girl says simply, "I saved that one."

A couple of weeks ago, we had an election to elect a president, senators, representatives for Congress and our own General Assembly. Kings don't get elected, but those in their kingdom do have a choice – a choice whether to claim the king's values and to live by them or not.

Today is Christ the King Sunday – a king who offered himself as a lamb, we have a choice. You have a choice, will you be sheep of The Lamb's fold? Will you allow yourself to be like him? And so be blessed? Or will you insist on finding your own way like an obstinate goat?

Don't be sheepish. That goes two ways: don't be shy or leery of making the decision; but also don't even bother thinking that by merely putting on a sheep's skin that you'll fool him or that it will change you. Don't fret that it's too late to be changed, or that there's not enough time to

make up for what you've not done. Don't fret that sometimes you really don't know whether you should act in a particular circumstance. Jesus doesn't keep a tally. All he asks is to accept his grace and the power he gives you to grow in love – hoping for... striving for perfection... but ultimately relying on who he is and trusting that even when you wander off, that he will seek you out even when life gets your goat.

This would be a good day for an altar call if we were together in person. You can still do it, though. Especially as we prepare for advent, next week, with all its anticipation of receiving Jesus Christ upon his return, now when we prepare to give thanks for all of God's blessings, now when we feel that something has got to change and when we're yearning for hope for something to end a viral pandemic but also an ongoing pandemic of sin and distraction, now is a good time. If you haven't made that choice – if you haven't decided to trust Jesus or to follow him – if you're that stupid sheep that got lost and now finds yourself living among the goats as one of them and you don't know how you can ever return – know this, he's been looking for you. The Lord God says, I will seek you out, and he has.

Whether you've claimed that offer of the kingdom and fallen short, or whether you've just not done it yet, today is as good of a day as any to claim that promise. You don't need to ask Jesus, to come into your life or into your heart. He doesn't need to be asked.

Let's just pause for a moment – turn to him and say, "Come into my heart Lord Jesus." Say it again, not as an invitation but with resolve of what you've always needed, "Come into my heart Lord Jesus, and let me have your heart, so that it might become my nature to love you always in everyone I meet. AMEN.