

REIGN OF CHRIST SUNDAY

“Sheep and Goats”

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November 20, 2011

Ezekiel 34: 11-16, 20-24

Psalm 100

Ephesians 1: 15-23

Matthew 31-46

Life is filled with many surprises. Just when we think we have some idea about the whole point of life, when things are under control and we feel we have some measure of self-worth and self-identity, we experience a new and different way of looking at our lives. Just when we think we know what it means to be successful, we encounter another measure of success. Such is this morning's Gospel lesson. Just when we have some ideas of what God expects of us, we are surprised to learn that faithfulness to God is measured ultimately by how much responsibility a nation, a community, a congregation, or an individual has been willing to accept for those who cannot help themselves.

The Scripture for this Reign of Christ Sunday addresses the concerns of Christ, the final judge, for the welfare of those who must rely on the compassion and generosity of others for their survival. It really begins long before the birth of Jesus. The prophet, Ezekiel, looked around at how the leaders of Israel, the shepherds of God's flock, had taken advantage of the weak and abused, the very sheep they were supposed to tend. Ezekiel is looking for that day when a Good Shepherd will personally come to the people of Israel; one who will care for and feed the flock with justice and compassion, not with the greed and selfishness of those who were currently acting as shepherds.

Ezekiel is quite clear about the actions of this Good Shepherd. He will seek those who are lost and bring back those who have strayed. The Good Shepherd will care for the injured and the crippled sheep and strengthen those who are afraid. He will act as a judge, keeping close watch over the fat and strong sheep so that they no longer take advantage of those sheep that are lean and less fortunate. He will watch to make sure that as the sheep graze, they do not ruin the grass around them, and therefore spoil it for others. When they drink, the sheep will not jump into the water with their feet and pollute it for others downstream. The Good Shepherd will control the strong sheep so that they do not threaten to harm the weaker ones. All this God will do through an appointed shepherd, a servant like David, who will guarantee God's will is done.

It is Jesus who assumes the role of Ezekiel's Good Shepherd and Judge. At the end of his earthly ministry, Jesus tells the disciples what will happen when the final day arrives. The nations of the world will be assembled and all the peoples stand before the One who is to judge. There will be a division; the sheep will be separated from the goats. And the basis of that division will be on the nation's response to the lowest and least of their society.

Maybe it comes as a surprise to us. Popular religion right now has led us to believe that somehow the judgment will be based on other factors. Sometimes we think the judgment will be dependent on how closely we have followed the Ten Commandments. Or some say you must be 'born again', while others say you must have the right true doctrine. Jesus' final concern is not whether the lowliest and the least of society have been worthy of help – the alcoholic, the homeless, the uneducated, the desperate, the foul-mouthed; rather it is the response of those who are capable of responding. In the last judgment, Jesus goes so far as to suggest that he is

so identified with the least worthy people that the way in which we respond to them is the way in which we respond to Jesus himself. From this morning's Scripture, it seems plain that an individual's love for Christ, a church's love for Christ, a community's love for Christ, and a nation's love for Christ is measured by the commitment to care for those who are outcasts, the ridiculed, the hungry, the abused – not because they have somehow earned it or deserved it, but because they were Christ's ultimate concern when he walked this earth.

Surely those who are standing before the judge are surprised. It comes as a surprise to them that the judgment is based on such a simple evaluation. The sheep are blind to their own action. They have been so accustomed to their way of responding to the needs of others that they don't see it as particularly special or commendable. Because they have experienced the love of God in their own lives, they desire, above all things, to share that love. It has become such a part of their lives that it is the natural response of their everyday living.

The goats are surprised as well. While they have accepted the love of God for themselves, the goats have kept it to themselves as well. They see no responsibility to those in need around them.

It is sometimes said that the Christian faith requires that we give until it hurts. But it might be more appropriate to say that the Christian faith requires that we give until it feels good. After all, that's how it is in life. Too many people are unwilling to accomplish much because they don't want to work through the pain until it feels good. A long distance runner, if he quit when his legs were filled with pain, would never continue. The muscles of his thighs would soon tell him to give up. But if he continues, working through that pain, eventually it begins to feel better, and, even though he is physically tired at the end, there is the emotional high of having completed the run, and the sense of triumph that comes with victory. He does that so often that, over time, it becomes a natural part of his life. He anticipates it and it is normal.

The problem with the goats in this morning's Scripture may well be that each time they thought about giving of themselves, they also thought of the pain, of what they might have to give up. That keeps them from ever trying. The sheep have somehow found a way to work through that pain, until giving of themselves becomes a satisfaction in and of itself. They give until it feels good, and so sense a fulfillment in Christian living.

Those who are invited to share in the kingdom seem genuinely surprised: "Lord, when did we do all that?" They seem unaware of the results, for themselves, of their response to others. Those who are found to be righteous don't claim to be righteous. Those who are excluded are surprised as well – perhaps they had been very concerned about living a godly life – they have read Scripture diligently, they have been faithful in worship, they have prayed every day. And the response of the judge, "I tell you whenever you refused to help one of the least important ones, you refused to help me," leaves them hurt and confused.

I want to say that we should never underestimate the need to be faithful in our reading of Scripture and that we should never believe that worship is unimportant or that prayer is just for a convenient moment. That is not at all what Jesus is telling us. These are important, indeed crucial, for us to be nurtured in the faith. Without them, we would surely tire of responding to the needs of others, for those needs seem endless and overwhelming. Without spiritual strength, all the good we seek to do will end only in frustration.

But Scripture, worship and prayer are not ends in themselves – we are sent out into the world to be bearers of good news to all people. We will be held accountable for how our Scripture reading, our worship and our prayer life have led us to respond to those in need, the weakest and lowliest of our society. To be truly wise is to see this as the end of faith. It would appear that Jesus is saying that faithfulness results in action and that devotion to God leads to commitment to others.

God knows what is in our hearts. God knows if our love is genuine and searches within to the motivation and the understanding of our souls. At the time of the judgment of nations and people, God will

know how we have acted or failed to act to see that God's will has been accomplished. That will seeks justice and peace for all people, wherever in the world they may be. The King comes to claim this earth. "I tell you, whenever you did this for the least important of these, you did it for me." How easy it is to ignore those who seem of little consequence and influence in the world. And yet Jesus uses one measure of our faithfulness precisely in terms of how we do respond to those who cannot, in turn, do anything for us.

May we find in this morning's Scripture a challenge, for the words are easy to understand, difficult to follow; and in that challenge may we discover the meaning of what it is to live by faithfulness.