

Christ the King Year A 2020
November 22, 2020

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

In our gospel reading this morning Jesus offers us a vision of the end of time and of ultimate judgement. The sheep are sorted from the goats, and as the band Cake told us in the 1990s, “Sheep go to heaven, goats go to hell.” That’s something you might hear in some churches today. It certainly would make for an easy sermon. “Okay everyone, we need to be sheep! Now, who’s up for brunch?” I mean it’s all right there in black and white in the text, right? Feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, care for the sick, and visit the imprisoned. It seems like the perfect checklist to make sure that we’re sheep. Of course, it’s never that simple.

As Lutherans, perhaps the obvious question is this: When do we know that we’ve done enough to be sheep? Are there score cards? Maybe they’re in the bishop’s office. Or maybe they’re stored at the churchwide offices. When we do good deeds, do we get “sheep points” and after we have enough we’re sheep? But then, how many “sheep points” do we need? How many are enough? How many hungry people need to be fed, or naked people clothed, for us to be sheep? There must be some number out there. Jesus certainly couldn’t mean all of them, could he?

Setting the numbers aside, the Church *does* sometimes act like there are score cards. Certainly, our world and culture act like there are score cards. And once we humans *assume* there are score cards and sheep points, then we humans do what humans do best: we divide ourselves. We start to argue over what counts for real sheep points and what doesn’t. And, if we have enough sheep points, maybe we get to be the king and decide who else gets to be a sheep like us and who are exiled as goats. We’d like to decide who will enter the kingdom with the King and who will be thrown out.

In my first year of seminary, I participated in field education rotation. On Sundays, I went with classmates to visit various churches around the city of Philadelphia, spending about 3 weeks visiting each church. One week, we visited an Episcopal church in what is now known as the Gayborhood. The priest of the church was giving us a tour, and he told us about how the church’s membership grew in the 1980’s and 90’s because it was the only church in the area that would accept gay members and care for those suffering from HIV and AIDS. And, it was the only church that would bury them. While the priest was explaining this, one of our classmates, a gentleman we’ll call Reggie, stood off in the corner. Later, when we were in the classroom for the educational portion, Reggie declared, “They will not inherit the kingdom,” in response to the discussion of welcoming gay men and women who were HIV positive into the church.

Sheep and goats. Reggie had his score card, and he knew that he was a sheep. And he had no problem declaring that other people were goats because they didn’t think or act or believe like him. Now, we normally would visit a church for a few weeks in Field Education Rotation. But Reggie never went back to that church.

This is only one example, there are others I’m sure, of people who believe themselves holy enough, believe that they have enough sheep points on their score card, that they get to be king and judge over others. We’re all doing it right now I bet. We’re all sitting pretty comfortable in judgement over Reggie. “*We* would never say something like that,” or “*We’re* a loving and inclusive church,” we say to ourselves. But that’s not *all* we’re thinking. There’s a

part that we've left off, isn't there? "*We're* loving and inclusive, ... unlike Reggie." You see, the judgment can go both ways.

So, let's get our scorecards! How do we know we are sheep? It sounds like the answer is because we said so. But that's not really a good measure. I asked earlier if the King really expected us to care for everyone, every time. Keep in mind, this King is the same Christ who says with love in his heart to a rich man, "Go sell everything you own and give the proceeds to the poor." He wasn't kidding then, and he isn't kidding now. So, do we care for everyone, every time? Looking at my scorecard, I didn't get all the sheep points every time I could have. If this is the judgement of the King, do we really think we're sheep? Have we *really* done all that we could?

Martin Luther struggled with this same question. He came to the realization that asking if humans were sheep or goats couldn't work when it came to God and salvation. The question isn't about us. The question has to be about God. Sheep and goats aside, we must wonder, is this King a carnivore? Because if our King is a carnivore, then sheep or goat, we're all just dead meat. So, is our God fixed on judgement and retribution, and ready to condemn us for our many sins? We have all fallen short. We are all sinners. If God is a carnivore, we're all—sheep and goats alike—on the menu.

The good news sisters and brothers is that our King is a vegan! Better yet our King would rather sacrifice himself, than lose one member—sheep or goat—from his flock. Christ is our King, and his judgement throne is the cross. The same cross where he said "Forgive them Father" he pronounced forgiveness for the goats and the sheep who hung him there. Christ is our King, the true paschal lamb who takes away the sin of the world. Christ forgives us not because we are good sheep who have earned this favor, not because we deserve to have our sins forgiven. But Christ forgives us because our King desires to save us, because our God is eager to forgive. This is our God. Our God is greater and more powerful than a god who could only save the worthy who could only welcome the sheep who did not stray. Our God can save us all sheep and goat alike, and this is exactly what God does.

Christ's justice is mercy, our King's judgement is forgiveness, restoration, and wholeness. So, we follow our King. We work for the kingdom, to bring about the King's justice that is mercy. And it's not so that in some far-off time and some far-off place of judgement we might receive that same mercy, but because we have already received it from our King on the cross.

So, we don't need scorecards, or sheep points. (tear up scorecard.) How do we know that we are sheep? How do we know we've been saved? Not because we say so or because our scorecard says so, but because God says so. This King's justice is mercy, a mercy that pushes us to be merciful, a justice that pulls us towards being just. This is the King's decree and command, that we act in the justice and mercy that we have already received. That we, as ones who are already subjects of the King, and citizens of His kingdom, live like it on earth. God calls us to live confidently in the promise that our mistakes, our sins, are met with mercy from our just and mighty King. And that at the last, in the final judgement, this unjust world full of broken people and old goats will not be destroyed. At the last, this unjust world and all the sheep and goats within it will be restored, and we all will be saved. Thanks be to God, Amen.