

**November 22, 2020**

This is Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday of the church year. Next Sunday begins Advent, we'll be lighting candles and waiting and watching for the birth of Christ.

Today we have the parable of the sheep and goats. In Seminary, I had a friend who raised goats, so we used to give each other a hard time. I used to tell him that goats were a waste of good hay. And he'd tell me that Jesus was a scapegoat, so there... And I'd say that makes him the lamb of God, so there... We had fun with it.

Fundamentally at the heart of this story is judgment and separation. And the judgment is based on a very clear criteria, as the lesson says, it's service to the "least of these who are members of my family." The sheep are those who fed the hungry, quenched the thirsty, welcomed the stranger and visited the prisoners. And the goats are those that didn't...

What's interesting to me in this parable, is that the sheep are bearing a cross to love their neighbor, and they hardly seem to know they're doing it. They weren't doing it for brownie points, they were just simply doing it because it was meaningful, because it was the right thing to do!

And of course, the goats just didn't get it. It wasn't on their radar screen. Apparently, they were more interested in arguing than anything else... "When was it that we didn't do those things?"

The difference between these two groups, seems to be whether a person is focused on helping their neighbor, or focused on themselves.

And I think I've said this many times, it's a paradox, a spiritual principle that when we focus on ourselves, we lose ourselves, we lose our meaning and purpose in life. And when we focus on others, when we work to help others, we find ourselves, we find our meaning and purpose.

Quick story... Growing up on the farm meant work. One summer my parents decided we were going to paint the chicken house. Now you gotta remember, we had ten thousand chickens, the chicken house wasn't a little brooder coop.

Now, dad said if my older brother and I worked hard and helped with the painting, we would get new bikes. So, there you go, we were motivated.

I remember spending a whole summer painting that chicken house! One person would stay on the ground and paint the bottom half, and someone else would be on a ladder and paint the top half. We had these big five-gallon containers of paint, white paint, that we would pour into little buckets.

The chicken house was built out of cinder blocks, and we had these big stiff brushes and we really needed to work it in. When we were done for the day we were usually covered with paint from head to toe. Mom would drive us to Eagle lake, and let us go for a swim. Which really meant we were just getting washed off, before she would let us into the house!

At the end of the summer we finished the job and we both got new bikes! And I remember feeling pretty proud of that bike... But even more important than the bike, I remember looking at the job when it was finished, and having an amazing sense of accomplishment. Even today, I'm proud of what we did...

Sure, it was hard work, but there was joy and meaning and purpose in a job well done. It was something to feel good about... All work, and especially and particularly with those who need help, is deeply meaningful.

One of the ways we bear a cross to love our neighbor is loving people who are different than ourselves. This holds the greatest potential for meaning and transformation. When we love people who are different, our hearts enlarge and our capacity to love grows.

Today in our country, after the election, we remain very divided... And it's amazing how evenly split it is... We have Republicans and Democrats, with razor thin vote margins...

And it's as if we are two countries and we don't seem to recognize each other. We've become two tribes, the good guys and the bad guys... And there is a huge temptation to see one another as the sheep and the goats, just depending on which side you stand on...

The good news today is that Jesus is the judge, and we are the Body of Christ-- as both Republicans and Democrats... We love one another! We work to build bridges and find unity.

God has called us by name, we work together, and we are proof that Republicans and Democrats live and work together in peace. Jesus is the glue that holds us all together. This is what makes us different than the rest of the world and for the sake of the world.

Jesus is this new and different kind of King, A King that offers himself especially and amidst difference and conflict, A King that judges to love, A King that offers that abundant and eternal life.

As we enter this Thanksgiving week, let's resolve to be grateful. When everything around us looks like it's falling apart and despairing, Jesus is right with us. Jesus hears our every prayer, and we know that nothing in all creation can separate us from His love.

Amen...