

Last Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 29 – Year A – November 20, 2011

Judges 4:1-7; Psalm 123; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30

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“Our brains are no longer conditioned for reverence and awe. We cannot imagine a Second Coming that would not be cut down to size by the televised evening news, or a Last Judgment not subject to pages of holier-than-thou second-guessing in *The New York Review of Books*”. So says John Updike in his 1989 book, *Self-Consciousness: Memoirs*. In fact, the rise of the information age has seriously blunted our ability and our capacity to experience true mystery, including divine mystery. Most of us won’t admit it aloud, but just like teenagers, many of us have come to believe that we know it all, or can at least explain almost anything. Sir Frances Bacon once said, “Knowledge is power.” Our confidence and belief in the power of knowledge is evident throughout our lives, not always in a bad way. We don’t run home scared that the sky is falling in like *Chicken Little* if an acorn falls off the tree and hits us on the head. Yet there is a certain lack of humility, and a false sense of security in being accustomed to feeling powerful, and in control.

Jesus’ description of the Last Judgment in Matthew’s Gospel is a good way to get grounded again, and remind us that there’s much more in heaven and earth than humanity will ever know in this life. In this case, Jesus reveals some of the mystery of the end of time, offering a conclusion to the preceding parables. To refresh our memories, the parables directly preceding today’s reading have a general kingdom theme. More specifically, they also deal with being ready for Christ’s return by maintaining a lively faith, including living in imitation of our Lord Jesus. In that respect, there’s no doubt that Jesus strongly promotes our awareness, care and concern for the least and most vulnerable amongst us. The substantial sound bytes of today’s story are pretty straightforward. What we read here is what Matthew’s Jesus will tell us any day of the week. Our grateful and visible response of faith in Christ is practical service to the poor and needy, the hungry and thirsty, the sick, and all those who are imprisoned. What is harder for us is living in the mysterious grey zone. Just as Updike notes, there have been centuries of holier-than-thou second-guessing on the entire topic of Jesus’ return in glory, and the Last Judgment in particular.

Let’s begin with the bigger pieces of the puzzle. There are three groups of people involved in this scenario: the sheep and goats of the nations, and “the least of these who are members of my family.” I won’t ask which group you think you belong to, since traditionally most Christians have identified with the sheep in the story. However, if that’s the case, then we haven’t been paying as much attention to this familiar story as we should. With ears to hear we notice that there’s an interesting twist on who “all the nations” might be. As an essential tool to our understanding, it’s important to look for the same phrase or word used elsewhere within the same author’s work, in this case Matthew’s gospel. Then we extend the search for other references throughout the Scriptures. Matthew’s use of the word translated as ‘nations’ always refers to those who are neither Jewish nor Christian. Equally, Matthew’s use of phrases referring to members of the family always reference Christian believers. It follows then that in this passage Jesus is talking about how He will come again in glory to judge all those who are neither Jewish, nor Christian.

This is truly a message of comfort for you and me, as believers in Christ. We don’t have to worry about whether we’re good enough to be named a sheep. Nor do we have to be at all nervous that we might be goats. By God’s grace, our salvation is assured by virtue of our faith in Jesus Christ. In this passage, Jesus will judge all the rest of the nations as sheep or goats. The basis of His perfect judgment will be on how others treat those who bring the Good News of Jesus Christ to the world. By virtue of our faith in Christ Jesus, we’re already blessed with the gift of everlasting life, and clothed in righteousness. Furthermore, we’ve already come into our inheritance, as adopted sons and daughters of God. Emphasizing the humility of our lives of love and service in His name, Jesus describes us as “the least of these”, members of His family. As we already know, disciples’ lives are filled with the kind of good works that we do as second nature. We’re witnesses of Christ’s love by our own grateful and loving care and compassion to all in need, in response to God’s amazing gift of grace. In the gospel of John (10:16), Jesus says, “I have other

sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.” You and I may never know all those who will be judged righteous by Jesus in the Last Judgment, whatever religious faith they do or do not profess in this life. Remember Paul’s dramatic experience of hearing Jesus speak to him on the road to Damascus. Jesus tells Saul that he is persecuting Him, because Saul is mistreating Jesus’ followers. You and I bear the face of Christ to the world and this reading from Matthew’s gospel tells us that at Jesus’ second coming anyone who persecutes Christians will be accountable to Jesus face-to-face.

The reading also tells us that God is present with us by the power of the Holy Spirit throughout our lives. Throughout the preceding parables, Matthew is quite explicit in defining authentic discipleship as faith in action. It is what we do after we say “yes” to Jesus. It is what Christians do throughout their lives in grateful response to God’s incredible gift of love. As Jesus describes it for us, we may not even realize the impact or significance of simple acts. These are simple acts of kindness that show others God’s loving, merciful and compassionate character. There’s nothing calculated about how we care for others. We’re not making lists of our good deeds in order to impress the Lord or try to earn our salvation. There’s nothing we *can* do to earn God’s love, or the free gift of salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. But there is a big message here. As the Body of Christ, our mission is to continue Jesus’ work, by constantly reaching out a loving hand to our neighbors. God craves for all people to know Him in His Son, our savior, Jesus Christ.

Ultimately, the sheep and the goats represent two types of people in the world. They are either those who put their faith and trust in the Lord, albeit unknowingly, versus those who disbelief or distrust Him. For those of us who do believe in Christ Jesus, we die to self and become increasingly dependent on God alone. We live in hope, and offer our lives to God in love and service, accepting the gift of everlasting life in Him. Those who disbelief in the Lord try to live independently, relying on self, and in so doing choose darkness instead of light and life. Nonetheless, Jesus, the Good Shepherd, continues to care graciously for all people, even those who ultimately reject Him. As Jesus describes the Last Judgment, the separation of the sheep from the goats is the final way in which our Lord compassionately provides for His entire flock, those who welcome Him, and those who reject Him. No one is outside of His gracious care. To paraphrase Christian and author, C.S. Lewis, for those who have lived their entire lives insisting “my will be done”, rather than “Thy will be done”, God will finally grant their request for the sake of His goodness.

Updike wisely reminds us that we don’t know it all, and that we need constant refreshers to stay humbly grounded in the Lord. Echoing Updike’s insight, Eugene Peterson seems to understand how easy it is for us to drift into goat-like behavior. He writes, “Given our sin-damaged memories that render us vulnerable to every latest edition of journalistic spirituality, daily re-orientation in the truth revealed in Jesus and attested in Scripture is required.” The spiritual disciplines of prayer and Bible study strengthen our relationship with the Lord and equip us to serve Him. In whatever ways we selflessly share God’s love with others, the greatest gift of love we can give is to share the Good News of Jesus Christ, as comfortably and easily as we share the latest local or world news to grab the headlines. As our Lord commands in the Great Commission later in Matthew’s gospel, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you” (28:19-20). Christ our King, Jesus, the Good Shepherd never stops seeking to reconcile all people to God the Father. Nor should we.

Amen.