

Christ the King – A
Ephesians 1:15-23
Matthew 24:31-46
November 23, 2008

Sermon preached by Laura Merrill
Wimberley United Methodist Church
Sermon notes not for publication

Whether you knew it or not, today is the last day of the year. Today is Christ the King Sunday, the day everything else has led up to, beginning with last Advent. We start the church year by following the life of Christ, from his birth at Christmas, through crucifixion and resurrection at Easter. Then we celebrate the birth of the church at Pentecost, and after a long stretch we call “Ordinary Time,” we end up at the end. Which is today. And by the end I mean the very end, or as some call it Judgment Day. We end up celebrating our hope that one day Christ will come again, as we say in the communion ritual. It’s an occasion to think about what that day might look like, what the world will look like when Christ comes again, when Christ is either King over all, or if you prefer, when Christ has come and set all things in order as they should be.

So we’ve come to Judgment Day, at least in the church year scheme of things. It’s not a day or concept that many of us are comfortable with. This is partly due to scripture texts like the one we heard today, which paint a picture for us of heaven and hell, with some people going one place, and everybody else another—forever. Our discomfort boils down to the fact that most of us 21st century mainline Protestants are way too civilized to believe in hell. Many of us have decided that avoidance of hell is not the motivation we want to build our lives on, with legitimate reason. I remember from the cottage meetings we had when I first came to this church how many people had fled to the UMC for refuge from some pretty abusive faith traditions. They had

grown up hearing that God's goal was to either get us to measure up to a really high standard of righteousness, or to catch us and punish us if we failed, which all of us were going to do. None of it was very promising, and it's real easy for people in that position to just opt out. If it means I'm going to hell, so be it, but I'm not playing that game. Many have decided that they'll take their chances instead on the possibility that maybe the universe is structured around some other order, around something more gracious and forgiving, something that even looks a little more like Jesus.

The problem is that we're faced with a Biblical record that seems at odds with our civilized, enlightened approach. The people who taught some of us that God was out to get us didn't just make that up out of thin air. We've got passages of scripture, like the gospel reading today and those of weeks past, that paint a pretty frightening picture of what happens to people who don't do what God wants them to do—agony, eternal death, weeping and gnashing of teeth. It's hard to know how to reconcile such a word with our deep modern conviction that God is gracious and merciful, that there is no death or evil that can finally withstand the power of God's love, and even for some of us that there is no human person, Christian or otherwise, whom God will not finally redeem and save.

So which is it? Is Christ the Great Avenger, tracking us down and meting out our justly deserved punishment? Or is he just a teacher and moral example who begs to suggest to us that we might try to follow the Golden Rule and consider playing nicely with each other, and if we decide not to, that'll be fine too? Does doing what God tells us to do matter in the end, or not? Will there be a consequence for our willfully

resisting the grace of God? And if so, what will that consequence look like?

It is significant that Christ's final word on where this whole human project is headed addresses the needs of the least of the world, those who do not have the most basic resources that allow for fullness of life. In today's world of many faiths, relativism, new atheism, this story puts the Christian ethic about as clearly as possible: If you want to get close to Jesus, if you want to look into his face, you must serve the poor and the hungry, the sick and the lonely. You must do what you can to meet their need. This is how you find Christ. There's no word here about professing the right doctrine, nor even professing the name of Jesus himself. There's no baptism required to inherit the kingdom of God, according to this text. There's only taking note of the plight of others and acting to make it right.

I grew up learning that this truth is so important, so essential to the life God has created on this earth, that there will indeed be a consequence for those who choose to ignore the cries of people around them. The concern of Christ for the vulnerable and the victims is non-negotiable, and if you want to get God riled up, according to the prophets, just tromp all over some poor people or some kids or old people. Smarter minds than mine have tried to work out what the judgment will look like for those who insist on worrying only about themselves. We all know that a lot of the time we create our own punishment. But I think the call that's clearest in today's passage and indeed throughout the scriptural record is the invitation, an invitation to relationship. This is what God seems to want most from us, and if we find ourselves where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth, it's most likely that we've put ourselves there.

As an answer to the question of judgment, I heard a re-imagining of the parable that I want to share with you. It starts by calling to our minds the sheep.

Do you know individuals like the sheep in this scene, people who spend their lives on behalf of the little and endangered of this world? They do what they do because love and compassion so fill their souls that it doesn't occur to them to look away from another's need or pain. Think for a moment and you'll soon have a small committee in mind to set among the sheep.

Then be quiet and listen.

"Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the realm prepared for you from the foundation of the world," says the Son of Man. But the sheep just stand there, looking across to the other side, their eyes wide not with rejoicing or satisfaction, and surely not with gloating, but with astonishment and the kind of fear the compassionate have when they see others in danger. For over there, on the other side, among the goats, are so many of those for whom they have cared all this while, and now what will become of those others? Are they to be separated forever? Who will care for them now?

The sheep know about many kinds of starvation, illness, and imprisonment. They have fed the hungry with bread made from wheat and given water to the thirsty. They have visited those with pneumonia, cancer and AIDS. They have visited in penitentiaries. But they have ministered to others in need as well. They have provided sustenance for to fill spiritual hunger and the awful thirst for meaning, the very cravings that drove the goats to selfishness and

seemingly unconcerned arrogance. The sheep have welcomed and befriended the goats when the goats were so estranged they'd become strangers even to themselves. And the sheep kept visiting the cells of those imprisoned in hatred, the goats who hated everyone, and themselves most of all. And the naked who lived without any chance of another's love to clothe them, or to adorn their faces with gladness, those the sheep had clothed with their own humble garments of affection and care. To those sick to death with the boredom of their world's routine, the sheep had come with the bread of encouragement.

The sheep had given so much of themselves to those others. How could someone now separate them forever from those others? How could the Son of Man in this moment call them "blessed?" How could they rejoice over their inheritance as they looked across the chasm, toward those who remained lost, sick, naked, and imprisoned in their own pitiful selfishness? How could they ever again sing a glad song? As we eavesdrop, we hear them weeping. They won't move.

The son of man studies them and calmly says, "You cannot go across. It is too late. For you there is no more time." For a moment there is stillness.

"Then you must go," declare the sheep. "Son of Man, you must remember now [your own agony when] strong hands were upon you. Son of Man, you must remember the moment when the soldiers pinned you to the cross, pounded in the nails, and you were condemned. You must remember the thirst out of which you cried, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' Remember the

torture of abandonment! You must go to them, Son of Man!"

A deep and heavy silence comes over the judgment scene. The Son of Man says nothing. He looks at the sheep, his own eyes now wide, looking like theirs. Then he turns, and he steps across. How could he not heed their voices? He had taught them to talk like that. They were using his own best lines on him. He would go. He could not judge from vengeance. He would have to go -- to Bethlehem, to Calvary, to Antioch, to Rome, to Kansas City, to Calcutta, yes, even to hell. He would spend eternity, if it took that, like a shepherd forever in search of lost sheep, working restlessly to slake the final thirst and break down the last prison. Some might hide from him forever, but his heart told him, and the look in the eyes of those sheep told him, he could never give up. If he was to be king, he must be a shepherd king, a tireless, searching king, a king with holes in his hands and crowned forever with thorns, scouring endlessly the depths of hell, looking, calling, and ...hoping one day to sit at the right hand of God, at table with everyone, every last one, to eat and drink of the supper which will have no end.

(Paul J. Nuechterlein, adapted from Frederick Niedner, "The Searching Judge," *Proclaiming a Cruciform Eschaton*, a small booklet published for the 1998 Institute of Liturgical Studies at Valparaiso University, pages 5-8; girardianlectionary.net/year_a/xrstkinga_1999_ser.htm.)