

Sermon for Reign of Christ the King Sunday 2011

Matthew 25:31-46

We come to the last Sunday of the church year. Next Sunday the whole cycle begins again with Advent, Christmas, Epiphany and so on. This is our last Sunday with Matthew as our focus gospel. Next Sunday we move on to Mark. The last Sunday of the church year was Todtenfest in the German tradition, but the more common, ecumenical consensus is that this final Sunday celebrates the reign of Christ the King. The gospel text is that final parable of Matthew, where the Son of Man comes in his glory and sits on the throne as judge, dividing the sheep and the goats. Christ the King and Good Shepherd is also the judge before whom all the nations gather. It is a parable and image unique to Matthew. It is an image of a great division which all herdsmen will recognize. It's what you do before you take your livestock to market or slaughter: you separate those that are ready from those that are not; those that are suitable for sale or butcher and those that do not yet make the grade.

In high school, my neighbor Tom Murphy and I went to an auction one Saturday morning and came away with a pair of twin one month old goat kids, not yet weaned. We bottle fed them at first, my Arnold and Tom's Arthur, and boy were they cute little billies. My Arnold lived a long time, much to my parents' occasional distress. I went off to college and got married and went to seminary, and Arnold just kept going, trying to get out of his pen at the farm, eating my mom's roses and other flowers in the adjacent yard, and being a nuisance. Arnold and I were playful, and I would get down on all fours and invite him to butt me in the head, and he would rear up on his hind legs, standing taller than I, and then he would come down right at me, our foreheads an inch apart, and he would gently tap me, and then we would push one another back and forth. All in good fun. But he was not so gentle with my parents, both of whom were afraid of him. The burn barrel was in the middle of his pen, and they would have to work together to get there and back without being knocked down. Through painful experience they learned never to turn their backs on Arnold.

Thirty years later my dear wife found me a pair of pygmy goats, just weaned and a little more than a month old. Brother and sister, we named them for our firstborn Adam's pre-sibling imaginary playmates, Tardy and Kiki. They were part of our Fort

Atkinson farmette life for a dozen years. They were my all-time favorite pets. Tardy and Kiki followed me around like well-trained dogs, and always considered me their mother. I still miss them, and whenever I see the Kluevers' goats, I wish Richfield would let me have goats again. Because of my odd affection for these critters, today's gospel parable of the judgment gives me some trouble.

The sheep represent the righteous who get to live and the goats are the unrighteous who get the ax. The Greek word that Matthew uses here for goats refers to small male goats which were destined for slaughter anyway. If you raise goats, you want one good breeding Billy and lots of Nannies to give milk and birth the next generation. Most tender young males are slaughtered and eaten before they get too old and tuff. Ouch.

When I was growing up on the farm, my dad raised a lot of hogs. We sold the last truckload of cattle when I was nine years old, and to mark the occasion of getting out of the cattle business, my dad and I rode in the semi cab across Illinois to the Chicago Stock Yards, stayed overnight at the Stock Yard Inn and rode the train home. It was quite an adventure. After the cattle, it was all hogs, all the time. Every fall, before the frost got too deep in the ground, we pulled up the fenceposts and rolled up the wire that surrounded the pen and moved it to naturally fertilize another acre on the field of clover and alfalfa. Making fence with my dad is my fondest memory of life on the farm, where our bond was tightest and conversation deepest. I still remember how important I felt when I was old enough to sit on the tractor and control the hydraulics and PTO to dig postholes for the four corners of the pen, and when I was strong enough to help drive the steel posts into the ground, I felt grown up. But I digress. My second most favorite thing to do on the farm was help load the pigs on market days. It would be summer and hot and we would get up early and get started while it was still dark. We would take the truck out to the pig pen in the hayfield and back up to the loading chute. (When I was just getting on to this part of the job, I once nearly tore off the open driver's side door of the truck when it caught on the fence as I was backing up.)

While I was lining things up just right so the top of the chute and the back of the truck met without gaps, Dad would be out in the pen with bright orange chalk, marking the backs of the hogs that he thought were ready for market. The chalk-marked chosen would be sold to Swift & Co. or Morrell and would become somebody's ham, bacon and pork chops. We would take our wooden hand gates and sort the chosen into a pen within the pen that narrowed like a funnel by the chute. When the chosen were in place, we closed the gate behind them and then

began the process of convincing them to get in the truck. Pigs are a lot smarter than most people think they are. They knew what was coming. Reluctant to get into that truck is an understatement. Those that were not chosen that day seemed nervous, perhaps aware that it was just a matter of time before it was their turn to be marked with chalk and chosen for a dead-end ride in Dad's truck.

The last judgment of Matthew 25 is not just about sorting out sheep and goats. The real point, as with many of the Bible's dramatic forks in the road, is not about punishment and reward, slaughter or salvation. It is about the way to live that leads to life rather than death. Scenes of judgment were common in Jesus' day, and it wasn't the great division of sheep for preservation and goats for perdition that got people's attention or taught them anything they didn't already know. The surprise element that is key to Jesus' parables is not the judgment but the behavior that signals redemption. The lesson is not about an afterlife of either punishment or reward, which is too often the focus of retail religion. It is about how disciples are to live together, sheep and goats together, daily making judgments by the choices we make about a hundred little things that don't seem to matter... but in the end sometimes find us in a holding pen with nowhere to go but into the back of a truck with its engine running.

Marilynne Robinson's 2005 novel, *Gilead*, is a long letter from an old and ailing preacher named John Ames. The letter is to be given to his young son after the father's death. John Ames, like his father and grandfather before him, pastored a small congregational church in a fictional southwest Iowa town near the Kansas border. There is a lovely passage in this letter that is one of the best commentaries on Matthew 25 you will ever read:

This is an important thing, which I have told many people, and which my father told me, and which his father told him. When you encounter another person, when you have dealings with anyone at all, it is as if a question is being put to you. So you must think, What is the Lord asking of me in this moment, in this situation? ...[The other person] would probably laugh at the thought that the Lord had sent him to you for your benefit (and his), but that is the perfection of the disguise, his own ignorance of it. (Gilead, p. 124)

In the hungry, the thirsty, the sick and the prisoner, we see Jesus in "the perfection of the disguise." In the end, at the end of the day, when all is said and done, it does not matter what we have said about Jesus and our relationship to him. What matters is how we have behaved in relation to others. What have we done with

this love we profess? What matters is how we have treated those whom Jesus called “the least of these.”

Jesus comes to us in disguise, incognito, in mysterious strangers who have no idea that they are bearing a message from the Lord to us. Remember Jesus saying that some will call out, “Lord, Lord,” but he won’t know them. The way to get to know Jesus is to open our eyes, our hearts, our arms and our bank accounts to the “least of these.” A volunteer for a meal program sees the long line of homeless and hungry people in our nation’s capital and prays, “Jesus, help me to see your face when you come through the line.” Neither the good deed doer nor “the least” in line for whom the good deed is done has any idea what is going on. The King of Glory comes unexpected, unnoticed, unrecognized, even uninvited. The Judge of All History may meet us in any chance encounter, when dealing with anyone at all, but most especially we are likely to meet Jesus in the least of these, the hungry, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the prisoner.

One of my favorite college professors, Ron Goetz, lived in a house across the street from the campus athletic field. As a student and later as college chaplain, I was often at his house and in his back yard for social gatherings. In fact, we lived next door to Ron and Harriett and their four children for a couple of years. Now there is a parking lot where our homes once stood side by side. There is a small marker where the Goetz house was and it tells passersby a name, a teacher at the college, years of birth and death and three simple words. Three brief words of Jesus to sum up all the hours of lectures and thousands of words written and spoken as a beloved professor in that place. Somebody wisely decided that Ron Goetz’s memory should be summed up this way: “Love your neighbor.”

Today we honor the memory of two members of St Paul’s, Geraldine and Delmer Staus. In memory of Gerry we have this lovely communion set, and in memory of Delmer we have the iron gate to the cemetery.

Their lives and now these memorial gifts remind us that “Love is not a principle to apply to this or that situation in our lives. Love is an event in which we are involved, person with person, creature with creature, neighbor with neighbor.” (Douglas John Hall) Delmer and Gerry were good neighbors. It was such a pleasure to visit with them during my first year here, and it was a distinct honor to preside at their funerals and burials here at St Paul’s. I do not pass the gate without remembering Delmer, and I do not bless the bread and wine in these lovely vessels without remembering Gerry.

We stand at the threshold of a new year of salvation history, when we say and sing to one another and the world that the Kings of Kings, the Lord of Lords, the Great Shepherd of the Sheep (and Goatherd of the Goats), the Judge of all nations is the Coming One, Immanuel, God with us.

When did we see you, Lord, hungry and feed you or thirsty and give you drink?
When did we see you a stranger and welcome you or naked and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?

And the King will answer, "Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it unto me." Love your neighbor and you will see Jesus. Give a poor goat a break.