

The Last Sunday after Pentecost
Christ the King
Year A, RCL
St. Anne's Episcopal Church
Winston-Salem, NC
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Clearly, things have changed a bit, over the last several weeks. Beginning back in the latter part of September, Jesus has been telling parables that speak of the Kingdom of God, often beginning, "The Kingdom of heaven is like" and then instructing those listening about the foundation that undergirds the Kingdom and how they should act to be included therein. And while many of these would seem to point to a later time of fulfillment, it was not until two weeks ago that Jesus began speaking about the eschaton, eschatology – you know, the study of the end; the end times.

Two weeks ago, the lectionary (although we did not use that Sunday's readings, instead using the lessons for the feast of All Saints'), recounted the Jesus' parable of the Ten Wise and Foolish Virgins and last week, the Parable of the Talents – each looking toward some future time when the Bridegroom or the Master arrives to welcome and reward. And today we are now confronted, in very specific terms, with the reality of the Final Judgment.

This, so-called parable of the "Sheep and the Goats," set the scene that, by Jesus' assertion will take place after the Messiah returns. Sitting on the "throne of his glory," the Son of Man will gather all the people of the earth – this is not simply the believers, there is no distinction between nationality or belief, but all the nations. When this great gathering occurs, the sheep will be separated from the goats. Now I'm not sure what you might think of sheep and goats – neither is very awe-inspiring. Goats – stubborn and unruly; sheep – not very smart and prone to wander. All are gathered before the throne to be judged.

The criteria of this judgment is simple – those who fed, welcomed, cared, clothed, visited the so-called "least of these" will be counted among the righteous and invited to enter into their inheritance – while those who refused to feed, welcome, care, clothe and visit the least among them are cast away. The funny thing is that the reaction of the members of each group is the same – they are confused, neither group understands when they have done this because they never saw the Son of Man wanting for anything. The sheep might wonder how they could have missed their

Lord in need, the goats might wonder the same. Their motivations are different – the sheep thinking that they weren't paying enough attention, the goats that they missed an opportunity to serve the Lord.

A shepherd knows the difference between the sheep and the goats because the shepherd is familiar with them and can separate them, even if they are similar in appearance – the shepherd knows their habits and has observed their actions. It is not enough to look like a sheep or a goat – their actions belie their true character. I would not be surprised if the goats heard the list of things for which the sheep were being commended and thought about all the times that they had given someone something to eat and drink and something to wear and had welcomed someone or gone to visit them or cared for them. It was not that they had ignored other people, but that they were not involved with others, save the ones whom they already knew. They did not feel it was their obligation to help those other folks. The sheep felt it was their obligation to help, and I would imagine, not just the “least of these.” The sheep were given to help all people, there was never any distinction, there were no categories of neediness, no hierarchy of the least, nothing that was to stop them from helping even those who, in their goatness, did not think they needed any help.

You see, this parable, at its heart is about the hear – about what motivates our actions. Jesus makes the distinction regarding the least, but reminds us that all are included in the family. Remember, we are looking at the Final Judgment when all the nations are gathered before the Throne. Jesus indicates that those assembled are members of the family. It follows that the service of the sheep was not simply to those who were the least, not looking for projects or paternalistically descending to help those “poor benighted souls,” but that their care was for all people and when, in that wide-ranging, universal action of service, care, welcome, those that were considered “least” were also amongst those for whom the sheep cared. I believe that there are those who, even in serving the least, miss the point. We all have probably known those who have not time for service – not for family or friends or colleagues – but will be so very kind and responsive to those who are considered “the least.”

Even though Jesus reminds us of the importance of our service to the least, we are subtly reminded of our relationship with all people. Our service is not of the type that is turned on only or most noticeably when someone who is considered among “the least” is around. Let me put it another way, once while serving at a soup kitchen, I had the occasion to overhear a conversation between two of the volunteers. They

remarked about the neighbors in line who were dressed nicely and began to question why they were there. There was even a noticeable difference in the way they treated the well-dressed neighbors and those that looked more appropriately among the least.

So, even in our service to others, we all need to be careful not to judge their situation, whether we know it or not. Our call is to serve, not simply the least, but all people. In that, we will clearly be serving those who are the most in need and thereby not run the risk of trying to play shepherd and miss the chance to help, even a goat, to see the magnificent love of God, that does not discriminate or make distinctions.

As we stand on the threshold of Advent, yes next Sunday is the First Sunday of Advent, we have arrived at another season of preparation. We have been afforded yet another opportunity, by the liturgical cycle, to spend some time re-assessing our motivations and clearing the path, both for ourselves and for others, that leads to the manger and Savior of the world. As crazy as this season can be, we are going to be reminded, through following the message of John the Baptist, of our calling as preparers of the way and our common journey to prepare for the Kingdom of God. Please, whatever you do and however you are led to do it, make time to be present to the preparation. It is like I tell the preschoolers, "If you are going on a trip or invite somebody over to your house, you have to be prepared." We have to be prepared to go to Bethlehem and to welcome Christ again into our homes and hearts. Whether it is walking the labyrinth and attending the Wednesday evening worship or joining in with Centering Prayer or marking your calendar to go a-caroling or to prepare baked goods or help with the pageant or just simply to be more present with yourself and with God, make sure that your goal is that preparation. Remember, it is not always about how much we do, it is all about the spirit in which we do them. Service as a means of preparation - of heart, mind, soul and body – to worship Christ the King, be prepared for the end times and help to usher in the Kingdom of Heaven.