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Matthew 25:31-46
Last Sunday of the Church Year
November 22, 2020

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text, Jesus speaks of the sheep and the goats, beginning, “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

If you think you’ve heard the parable of the sheep and goats before, you’re mistaken – not because you haven’t heard this text before, but because this text is no parable! Sadly, even our Lutheran Study Bible’s notes refer to these words of Jesus as a parable without noticing the tell-tale signs that Jesus means to speak plainly and openly in his final words of teaching before He and his disciples leave Jerusalem on that Holy Week Tuesday, not to return again until celebrating the Passover in the upper room where the New Covenant would be instituted and, just a few hours later, sealed by the blood and death of the testator.

In view of such weighty salvific life-giving, testament-instituting words and actions, it’s significant that Jesus intends to be plainspoken about his glorious return. All of history culminates in this unified reality, even if separated by centuries and millenia, nevertheless there is a theological unity in the death and

resurrection of Christ *and* in the glorious return of the ascended King.

Thus, it's important that we understand this is no parable... as recognized easily when we look for the signs of a parable. There is no explanatory introduction by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, "Then He spoke again to them in parables." There is no "the kingdom of heaven will be like" – as we've heard introducing the two parables that lead up to this text; there's no earthly story with a heavenly meaning. Where *on earth* does a king separate sheep and goats and then judge them according to their works and throw some of them into an eternal fire and give others his inheritance? Sure, the imagery of sheep and goats may be similes (the text says, "He will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates sheep from the goats"), but a simile doesn't fictionalize or "parable-ize" this text. The very last thing Jesus is going to publicly teach is no parable, but is plain-speak... no "the kingdom of heaven will be like," but rather "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne." Expect it! It will come to pass!

You ought not doubt the incarnate reality of the Son of Man coming in his glory! Just as we've recently heard St. Paul explain to the Thessalonians, or (in today's epistle) to the Corinthians what the resurrection will be, and we didn't say, "Oh, he didn't really *mean* that the dead in Christ will rise first. He didn't really *mean* that the

trumpets will sound. He didn't really *mean* Christ will deliver the kingdom to God the Father. It's all just a parable." On the contrary, St. Paul said, "In *fact*, Christ has been raised from the dead" and, to the Thessalonians, "Encourage one another with these words"! Why *encourage*? Because they're not merely symbolic of dreamy hope; their plain-speak for what is coming in flesh-and-blood reality on that last and glorious day! Christ has hinted at it; he's taught about it throughout his ministry; he *has* spoken parables about it throughout this Holy Week leading to his passion. Now it is time to say it plainly, that all might remember that when he goes off to die upon the cross, his is no defeat... but rather victory through suffering, just as promised in that "first gospel" in Genesis 3. His is no defeat, but his resurrection is the *firstfruits* of what He himself said we would see on that Last Day. In short, the End has come...you're living in it. It began with the death of Christ – "It is finished" – and was first *seen* in the resurrection of Christ, and we now live at the threshold of eternity, but (each in his own order) it will be again be recognizable to sight once this era of the Last Day is drawn to its close.

So, if what we meditate upon in our text is no parable, then we ought weigh carefully what it will mean when Jesus judges those on his right and those on his left. For, what does the text *plainly* say he will judge?

He will judge your works; which is to say, He will judge your love for your neighbor (specifically, you fellow brother in Christ)...

which is to say, He will judge you according to the Ten Commandments.

Does that come as a surprise to you? It shouldn't. Hasn't God's holy Law always governed creation? Have we really been lulled into thinking God *forgot about* his divine Commandments?... that He somehow now sees them as a dusty relic, a holdover of a bygone covenant but without meaning or purpose in the current relationship between God and Man? Is it mere coincidence that the whole western world that has ignored, rejected, and forgotten the holy Law of God is crumbling around us in its wickedness – not just in the darkest corners of society, but in the very heights of our social order, right out in plain sight? Put more positively (constructively), is it pointless or purposeless that we most often pray after the Holy Supper that the Lord would, *by* that Holy Sacrament, strengthen us “in faith toward You and in fervent love toward one another”? Isn't that the Ten Commandments? First table: “Faith in you.” Second table: “Love toward one another.” Why do we pray that so often? Just because we're a bunch of prudish old-school moralists who want to keep our children from enjoying this world's true revelry? Or because God remembers His holiness! God continues to teach and impress upon you the Ten Commandments *for a reason!* You continue to be taught to live them out and define your daily life by them *for a reason!*:

We know Christ will return. There's no reason to keep God's Holy Law if you have no confidence in His Gospel. If Christ has no victory, if He has no authority over powers and dominions, if He will not return to vindicate His Church, then why hope in, why have faith in, why honor and revere His Holy good order as recorded in the Commandments? But, we know Christ will return in his glory to judge the living and the dead... and He will judge them according to the Ten Commandments, you might say specifically the Second Table of the commandments – love toward neighbor: “I was hungry and you gave me food, thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, sick and you visited me, in prison and you came to me.”... “As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.” The second table of the Law, lived out in faith as prescribed and described in the First Table of the Law: Faith in Him (first table) produces love towards your neighbor (second table) and, specifically, those who – like you – hope in Him.

Now, right about now you probably suspect I've forgotten what it means to be Lutheran... that I've forgotten about salvation by *grace* apart from works. And, as is typical when we deal with, for example, the end of the Athanasian Creed, which says “At His coming all people will rise again with their bodies and give an account concerning their own deeds, and those who have done good will enter into eternal life, and those who have done evil into eternal fire”... as is typical, we seek to wiggle away from any notion that

sounds remotely like salvation by works, including the concept of God judging our works.

But that's exactly what Jesus says here: he will judge you according to your works. Does that prick you at the heart because you know the works of your Old Adam and the very earthbound-focus (idolatry) of your daily life? Then repent. Does it make you realize you wouldn't stand up to the least bit of scrutiny among your fellow man, let alone the Divine All-knowing God? Then repent.

And, as you rightly repent, for God's children *ought* desire to do what is right and *ought* thirst for righteousness and *ought* recognize that God calls us to holy living... and so, as you rightly repent, take comfort that such judgment of your works is **not** a judgment of salvation, for it comes *after* the resurrection... *after* the sheep have been separated from the goats. The Last-Day judgment is not a judgment unto salvation ...for *that* judgment (the one of salvation), at your death... that judgement was that you had a share in Christ's death, his sacrificial death that justified you and gave you the right to die in confidence... so that your death in Christ brings you out of the great tribulation, and those who have been saved by Christ crucified – saved by faith in *Him* and *His* righteous death in their stead – they now stand clothed in Him, their sins having been washed and their robes made white in the blood of the Lamb.

In other words, the judgment upon your works does not determine your salvation on that Last Day; rather, the already-

completed-at-the-cross judgment upon your salvation determines your works on that Last Day.

Jesus makes this clear when he says, “Come, blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” Blessed by the Father... inheriting the kingdom *prepared* for you far before you were *preparing* for it. It has been prepared, that you may inherit it. To inherit is not by works, but only by grace and love from a merciful adoptive Father. To have a kingdom prepared for you is not something you have built by your labor, but only that which has been built for you by a self-sacrificing older brother, Christ Jesus.

That King who comes wearing a crown of victory once came wearing the crown of shame. The King who comes again in His glory once came in humility to do the heavy-lifting of salvation – to pay sin’s debt, to make atonement for you, to bear your condemnation... that you may now be certain that because He was once forsaken by his Father, you will never be forsaken, but may now inherit all the Father has for his dear Son. In that dear Son’s blood you are covered; in his righteousness, you are acquitted; in his sacrifice you are free... free to live as a sheep of Christ, free to live in joy of God’s holiness, free to live according to His commandments without fear of judgment against your Christ-earned salvation.

Thus, live in faith of Him, and flowing forth from that faith will be love toward your neighbor. Flowing forth from that first Table

of the Commandments comes the love of the Second Table of the commandments: faith in Him, fervent love toward one another.

But, live *apart* from faith in Him, like the foolish virgin or the untrusting servant who buried his share of God's property, and you will not have the salvation and certain freedom to live for your neighbor. Live *apart* from faith in Him, and you will always live trying to self-justify, "When did I not do these things for you? I *knew* you were a hard man!" Such is the complaint of faithlessness. Such is the protest that fears the Judgment of the Last Day, as it strips away the works of faithlessness.

But, for you, baptized, the Judgment on the last day is seen *clearly* through the lens of the Sacrificial Lamb: "Come, inherit the *kingdom prepared for you.*" Yes, that same kingdom of heaven that "*is like...*" (the parables say), that same kingdom of heaven that "*will be like...*" (the parables say), that very kingdom of heaven *has been* (no parable says, but Christ's plainspoken Word)... *has been* prepared for you by Christ Jesus!

Thus, remain steadfast in this faith in Christ, even as you sense the whole world rejecting him and pressuring you to do the same. Take heart, that's not unique to you. Recall: Christ spoke these words to his disciples just two days before they would be scattered when their shepherd was struck, and it would take their Good Shepherd to re-gather them, restore them, and re-focus them on *His* victory, *His* authority, *His* promises. So also with you: you are truly

one of those sheep to be separated from the goats on that Last Day, but that means that in this *era* of the Last Day, you ought expect to be harassed as sheep, threatened as sheep, ... even, as St Paul says it, “We are as sheep to be slaughtered.” Truly, the devil would love nothing more than to separate you from Christ and number you among the goats.

But, St Paul says, “nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God *in Christ Jesus*.” There’s the key: remain in Him! For, in Him, your future is safe. Even if all should be taken from you, even if sin plagues you and every temptation torments you, nevertheless you belong to Christ. And your citizenship is in that “kingdom of heaven” that now *is* yours by faith, one day *will be* yours by sight, but already *has been* prepared for you by the very Son of Man who will come again in glory with his angels and bid you “Come, inherit that kingdom...I have secured it for you. Inherit it as a bride takes an equal share in all that belongs to her groom and as an orphan lays claim to all that belongs to the Father of his adoption.”

A blessed end of the Church Year to you, even as you continually learn to pray, “Come quickly, Lord Jesus.”

In the Name of the Father
 And of the Son
 And of the Holy Spirit.
 + AMEN +

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 Calvary Lutheran Church
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