

Matthew 25:31-46
Sunday of the Fulfillment
November 26, 2023

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

Our text, the Gospel account of the Last Day, which Jesus begins, “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,

For the last two weeks, we’ve heard Jesus explain the anticipation of His glorious return through the parables of the Bridegroom and the Talents. But now, the parables are over. Note that well: this text is no parable. The time for heavenly stories is past. Jesus now – in his final teaching of that Holy Tuesday, his final words of public instruction as recorded by Matthew’s gospel – now Jesus describes the final day in detail, even if using illustrative language, saying, “he will separate people one from another *as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.*”

The comparison is not meant to ‘soften’ the account, but to bring to remembrance in a single phrase all that has already been taught in our Old Testament reading ...and, if you can’t remember Ezekiel, certainly the Gospel of John, in which Christ says: “I am the Good Shepherd; the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep... My sheep hear my voice, and I know them,

and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish in the eternal age, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.”

In the single image of “sheep,” Jesus brings to our remembrance the great truth that our salvation is by God’s grace alone, through the sacrificial life-giving of Jesus Christ alone... that, by his blood and death, the sheepfold that is the Christian Church has been redeemed... and by his taking up his life again to be their Shepherd, that same Church has been led to verdant pastures and still waters and a table set even in the presence of enemies, and that Church has been safeguarded as the people of His pasture and the sheep of His hand.

So then, anyone who wrestles with the end of our text as if works contribute to one’s salvation has completely overlooked Jesus’ purpose in using a term like “sheep.” Such error would be not unlike James and John, who knew not what they sought when they asked to sit – one on Christ’s right and one on his left. But, in the separation of sheep and goats, we see clearly. The humble status of sheep ought forever be our delight... that we would be served and safeguarded by Christ, the Shepherd and Bishop of our souls. Perhaps it’s merely coincidental that, in this current generation of the sports world, the term ‘goat’ has been made one of glory – “Greatest Of All Time.” But such glorious language

is earthly, and it lulls the world into indifference regarding the Day when Christ will return and separate the saved sheep from the condemned goats.

So then, on that glorious day, the salvation of the Church will be made visible before all, and our life everlasting will be seen plainly as completely dependent upon God's grace.

But, that life everlasting which is now life in the Church on earth is not just one of *salvation*, but also one of *sanctification*. It is not just a life of faith in God's grace, but also a life of love toward fellow Christian. Thus, when Jesus explains the final-day back-and-forth between the King and the sheep, he is highlighting that not just the *salvation* of the Church will be on display, but also the sanctified *life* of the Church will be on display:

"Come, you who are blessed by my father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave me food; thirsty, and you gave me drink; I was a stranger, and you welcomed me; I was naked, and you clothed me; I was sick and you visited me, in prison and you came to me."

Yes, the salvation of the Church can be clearly heard in the mention of sheep inheriting the kingdom prepared since the foundation of the world. But, the rest of that description is about the Church's *daily* life and *daily* love of one another: "When you did this to the least of my brethren, you did it to me."

What glory and delight it brings the Father in heaven when the children of his household live in love toward one another. In fact, the word “blessed” that begins this monologue – “Come, you who are **blessed** by my Father” – that word blessed is *not* the same word as in the Beatitudes, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” That word in the Beatitudes is μακαριοι... you are blessed as a benefit of the God who has grace toward you. But, as you are safe in that life of salvation, this word “blessed” in our text is one of a loving father fawning over his beloved: “Come you who are blessed” – the word is ευλογημενοι - like “eulogy”, the Father speaking glowingly of the beloved of whom He is proud. “Come, you of whom your Father speaks so well and eulogizes.” Now, again, the sentence continues, “Inherit the kingdom.” Such can only happen by grace toward the beneficiaries of a final will and testament sealed by the blood of the cross. But, *why* does the Father speak so well of you:

“For, I (Christ says) was hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, imprisoned, and you loved me. You loved your brother, and what Father does not rejoice over his children loving one another?”

And you know how the dumbstruck faithful respond: “Lord, when did we do these things for you?” And you know the final response: “Whenever you did this to the least of my brothers” – the least of *your* brothers, your fellow Christians – “you did it to me.”

In other words, the life of the Church in anticipation of Christ’s glorious return is not simply a life in which you “stay awake and keep watch” for your own salvation; nor is it a life in which you invest wisely in Word and Sacrament and work with the trades of heaven only to gain for yourself and strengthen your own conviction in your own salvation. No, the daily life of the Church eagerly expectant of Christ’s glorious return is marked by love for one another. Such cannot be done for your own benefit or your own salvation; not only is that salvation already secured in your inheritance as the adopted, but loving my neighbor for my own benefit is only a self-serving *show* of love. No, you live in love of your fellow Christian simply because that is the daily life of the Church in anticipation of Christ’s return.

For what purpose does the Holy Supper strengthen you but for “faith in God and fervent love toward one another.” Not a generic love for a faceless world, but a specific love for those in the pews next to you. These are your brothers, these are the church’s treasures. So safeguard them, love them, care for them.

“This is my commandment,” Jesus says, “That you love one another.” Again, the apostle Paul says, “If I have [all the gifts of the Spirit] but have not love, I am a clanging cymbal,” ...useless, worthless for the benefit of the family of Christ. Again, the apostle John says, “This is love, not that we first loved God, but that He first loved us... therefore, we ought love one another. Beloved, let us love one another.”

Such is the life of the Church; such is the life of good works flowing from salvation, over which the Lord will speak well when, as the Athanasian Creed says, “they that have done good shall go into life everlasting (that’s what we inherited); they that have done evil into everlasting fire” (what good is any show of love if done for self-preservation and not with faith in their certain salvation in Christ?).

This daily life of the Church should be common sense to us, but it is something we must relearn because of the independent, antinomian spirit of the mobile 20th century. In the last century, in this new age of mobility, the Church has been redefined by us – no longer a sheepfold of care, no longer the family of God to be loved and embraced in this place for all of life... but, instead, our mobile Christianity has envisioned the Church to be a spiritual self-service station. I travel where I want, live the adventurous life I want to live, move wherever I want to

move for education, career, personal interests... and – when needed – I stop at the nearest, most convenient, spiritual service station for a quick fuel up. I care not who's there, for they – like me – are probably just coming and going. We quickly refuel, grab whatever goods are conveniently located at eye-level, and head back out into the adventures of the big, wide world.

That is *not* the life of the Church, for the Church is not a convenience service station, but it is the adopted of God gathered around the Word and Sacraments, with joy that the continual outpouring of Christ's gifts not only fill them up with faith in God, but also fill them with love for one another.

Look around you, Christian, and you see your brothers in Christ. Look around you, and you see who you are given to love. For such is the life of the redeemed – not in the sense that it causes and sustains the life of the redeemed (that's Word and Sacrament, which *give* the life of the redeemed)... but, to love our fellow Christian of the same sheepfold, that is to *live* the life of the redeemed.

Such love is not an exhausting, frantic loving of your fellow Christian. But it *is* to keep watch with them; stay awake in right doctrine with and for them. "Encourage one another with these words", the apostle tells the Church in Thessalonica. Yes, encourage and exhort and defend their daily life in the Truth. Call

them to repentance wherever necessary; rejoice in their forgiveness as soon as possible. Expect the same in return. Where they are hungry and thirsty for daily bread, give them 'a fish for today' and teach them how to fish for a lifetime; and, if you are the one being helped, receive the help with thanksgiving and humility. Where one is hungering and thirsting for righteousness, bring them to the pulpit and altar of God. If your fellow Christian is lacking and impoverished, clothe and care for them. If one of your fellow congregants is a stranger to you, welcome them in and get to know them; for where can there be love and encouragement in the face of the world's onslaught against the Church when we know nothing of each other? When they are imprisoned for their own faults, visit them... and should they be imprisoned for their faith, protect their reputation not only before the world, but especially in you own heart... be not ashamed of them, but stand by them. When they are sick, tend to them; when they die in Christ, gather with the mourning congregation, even if all you knew of the deceased is that he went to the 'other' Sunday service. Even so, he was one of the brothers of Christ, and Christ made sure the fellow Christian was safeguarded in the faith as that one ran his race, finished his course, and now we may rejoice in Christian love and certain hope that he rests from his labors.

How can such Christian love be praised by God if we think of the life of the Church as simply being ‘there for me wherever I want to go.’ To be sure, the Lord told Joshua, “I will be with you wherever you go.” Christ will be there for you; in Word and Sacrament He will care for you; but if you are to leave the church in one place for the church in another place, you better go with the primary purpose of making those sheep your own, supporting their love of Word and Sacrament, and caring for each other against the backlash of the Old Adam, the world, the devil.

And when we realize that this is the daily life of the Church – not politely nodding past our fellow Christians each Sunday, but helping them wrestle to stay awake and keep watch for Christ’s return – when we realize this is the Church’s daily life sustained and strengthened by the life-giving means of grace – then we properly love one another and therein properly help one another prepare for Christ’s return.

In other words, as “Church,” your unity (in Christ) depends on **doctrine**; your harmony (with one another) depends on **love**. How do you prepare for Christ’s return, but by living life in and with the Church. The Church, which is the full number of those who gather at the altar of Christ to be fed forgiveness, life and salvation... and the Church, which is the full number of those in the pew next to you, that – fed forgiveness and strength – you

may love them with a fervent love toward one another that urges each other onward to the final day of the Church's glorious vindication.

And, when it becomes second nature to us to live in such way, then we do not notice it, do not keep record of it, do not have temptation to proudly stumble over it... but genuinely ask our Lord, "When did we do these things for you, O Christ?" We were too busy helping each other eagerly anticipate the Church's glorious vindication to notice the burden-sharing of the Church's present suffering.

And those who consider this present suffering to not even be worth comparing to the glory to be revealed to us may only live in such way because they live in the truth of salvation divinely won and freely given by Christ and lavished upon us by the Father who loves his adopted as brothers of his only-begotten... and thus the Father eulogizes them, speaks well of them, showers them with good words of great joy: "Come, inherit the kingdom I have prepared for you since the foundation of the world."

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

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