

Early in September Marci and I met to talk about my work here – what I have been doing and what I saw for my future – and about completing the process of making me into an actual, official, by-golly Commissioned Lay Pastor. One of the things we talked about was preaching. This is something I enjoy doing – certainly not every Sunday, but on occasion. I suggested that once a month was probably too often, but 4-6 times a year would seem to me to be about right. That may or may not be. Time will tell. But at that point we talked about the first few Sundays where it would be helpful for me to deliver the message. The first of those, as it turned out, was to be November 16, when we would celebrate Christ the King Sunday a week early. Fine, I can preach on the 16<sup>th</sup>. That agreement turned to genuine interest though when I discovered that the lectionary text for Christ the King Sunday this year is Sheep and Goats.

### **Sheep and Goats**

I really like Sheep and Goats.

First of all it has a special significance for Matthew. In Matthew 25 Palm Sunday has come and gone, Jesus has cleansed the temple and he is in his final week of teaching in Jerusalem. And of all the teachings in this most scholarly of gospels, this is the last one. The final parable. The end of the course in Christian living.

If for no other reason than that it deserves special consideration. In it we find what is probably the most straightforward, complete, compact statement of the task before us. We've got a laundry list: Feed, clothe, welcome, heal, visit. And we've got a pretty clear definition of who we are to feed, clothe, etc. We know something about the rewards for accomplishment, and we know something about the consequences of avoiding this work.

Those of you who have heard me pick apart a parable before, will remember that my first rule is to find yourself in the parable. Which of the characters are you? That tells you a lot about what Jesus is saying directly to you in any given parable. But this one isn't like that. In this parable you get to choose. Sheep or Goats; which will you be? Maybe I like this parable because, for once, I've got control. Note that there's no grace here. The sheep win and the goats lose. You are either welcomed into eternal life or cast into eternal punishment. Of course, I like to imagine myself as one of the sheep – standing safely in the sheepfold, watching through the fence rails while those poor, misguided, self-centered goats are loaded into a cattle truck for their one-way trip to the nether regions.

At least that's how it plays out in my imagination. Then I come back to my senses and remember how I really live my life. And I understand. I'm not looking through the fence-rails. They're the rails on the side of the truck-bed. And those aren't the goats that I'm looking at. They are sheep and I'm on the truck. And it's about ready to pull out. I'm pretty sure many of us experience these "goat-moments" from time to time.

You see why I love this parable.

### **The King**

But believe it or not, we're not going to spend a whole lot of time today talking about sheep and goats. Much as I would prefer this to be "Sheep and Goats" Sunday, it isn't. It's Christ the King Sunday. So today we are going to ask a different question of this parable. For the moment we're going to focus not so much on who we are in this parable, but rather on who Christ is.

It starts out simply enough. It's a courtly scene with the Son of Man ascending the throne to pass judgment. Pretty standard stuff for a day like today. The problem comes in the details of the judgment. Listen. "I was hungry." "I was thirsty." Before our very eyes we see the king changing. "I was a stranger." Gone is the throne, the orb, the scepter. "I was naked." Gone are the robes of state, the crown, the fine linen tunic. "I was sick." "I was in prison." Gone is the power. And we see, standing before us, our king; not arrayed in the finery of royalty but garbed in the simple, course cloth of a common peasant;

- A beggar, waiting patiently for a few coins, imagining nothing beyond the next meal;
- Joe the Plumber, wanting nothing more than an honest day's pay for an honest day's labor;
- Our next-door neighbor, to all outward appearances just like me, but behind her locked and bolted doors dying a death of anxiety and fear;
- The guy standing in line at the rescue mission, waiting for supper and maybe a bed for the night;
- The couple across the street – so caught up in a lifestyle of acquisition that they've run themselves hopelessly into debt buying that new big-screen TV, those new 4-wheelers, that Ski boat, their month long vacation in the Caribbean.
- A mother holding her sick baby, crying because she can't afford to take her child to the doctor.

This is our king. This is our Christ. This is who we honor, who we serve. Welcome to Christ the King Sunday.

### **Service**

I suppose it's no accident that I am standing here a week after Pledge commitment Sunday using the lectionary text from next week's Christ the King Sunday. Because while there is no mention of pledge cards in the parable, it is clearly a stewardship message. It's about time and talents, and how we use them. In the world of this parable there is no gray. There are only sheep and goats; those who serve and those who don't.

But there's something else about this parable that's really important. When it comes to the time of judgment, both are surprised. Both ask the same question: "Lord, when was it...?" In the world of the parable the categories are so inverted that the righteous don't even know who it is that they have been serving and the unrighteous don't realize that there was service to be rendered.

The more I read the Bible, and particularly the Gospels, the more I am convinced that God's message in Christ's incarnation cannot be fully understood except within the context of upsetting the prevailing paradigm.

Those are big words. What do they mean? There are a couple of ways to explain them. Let's first look at what the first-century church would have heard.

### **Paradigms of Power**

The first-century readers would have associated the king of this parable with a Caesar-like image; Caesar, who maintained the Pax Romana; an incredible period of world peace, at the point of a legionnaire's sword. For Caesar, peace was achieved and maintained through might of arms. That is, peace was maintained because those who were inclined to upset or challenge were likely to experience the might of Rome on a first-hand basis, at the blade of a sword, or on the arms of a cross. It is power that controls, power brought to bear so that all might be peaceful and orderly.

Some of us will remember the Tiananmen Square protests in the spring of 1989. You get the picture.

But what Jesus is doing in this parable is turning the whole concept of power upside down. The power of the King of Kings is not obtained or maintained with spear and sword, rather the true power of our King is experienced through service. And here's the most extraordinary point of this parable. The true power of our King, our God is found when it is God is the one in need. I was hungry, I was thirsty, I was a stranger, I was naked, I was sick, I was in prison. I was in need.

Power in God's terms – true power – is realized through compassion, love, caring concern for neighbors and strangers certainly; but especially for the poor, the outcast, the prisoners, those without a voice, those who live (if you can call it living) on the fringes of society. That is the source and the expression of our God's power. It is a power that empowers, given so that all might have more abundant life.

### **Today**

But how does that play out in Boise, in November 2008?

While we most often think of Jesus' message in terms of his interactions with those in need of physical or spiritual healing, we are reminded, particularly in the fall of 2008, that his message also speaks to the realities of our current economic situation. Now, as then, human tendency is to view things from a "balance sheet perspective." We evaluate worth based on some criteria, as though worthiness can be earned. But the hard truth is that the criteria we tend to use are less likely to be valid in today's economy.

Gone are the days when it was assumed that increasing home values would compensate for the lack of ability to adequately repay a mortgage. That concept has been a significant (though not the only) contributor to an economic downturn the likes of which many of us have never before witnessed. Recovery from this situation will be neither quick nor easy. Recovery from this situation will require that we learn and adopt new levels of fiscal responsibility, at the national, state and local levels certainly; but most importantly in our own personal lives. While this is true, it does little to provide hope, or help to those caught in the maelstrom of the crisis. What is Southminster's response to those in our community who are in danger of losing their homes?

Gone are the days when jobs were secured by a strong international market for printers or computer chips, when operating costs were low enough to enable farmers to afford to keep farming, when a healthy local economy assured a steady predictable stream of consumers for goods and services. Now, more than ever we see that we are all participants in the local economy and losses in one sector ultimately affect all sectors.

Gone are the days when a career level job implied a living wage and an affordable health care benefit. How are we called to see and to serve those of our community who are unemployed, or under-employed?

Gone are the days when we can look at a person and tell whether they were industrious or lazy, a careful planner or a careless spender.

In that way, this parable speaks directly to us, today. The king didn't say "I was hungry because I got laid off when they shipped my job to Asia." "I was thirsty because I gave my water bottle to a homeless

person down by the river.” “It was my first Sunday here and you spoke to me because I looked like I might fit in your church.” There are no “because” clauses in the King’s story, no reasons given to explain the King’s state, no justifications for why aid is merited. It’s very simple. I was hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, in prison. I was in need. That’s all.

Whether we as a church, we as individuals, end up in the sheepfold or on the truck depends on whether or not we see that; and having seen, how we react.

### **The Bottom Line**

So where does that leave us? I have three thoughts:

First, we must accept the truth (yes I said truth) that God loves everyone – regardless of who they are or what they’ve done. Except, it seems, for those who refuse to accept that truth. Interesting. Hard, but interesting.

Second, I said there was no grace in this story. That’s not quite true. Grace is there, just not in the form we usually think of. The grace is shown in the actions of the sheep – caring for those in need, regardless of whether they deserve it. So the lesson about grace in Jesus’ final parable is this. The grace we receive is the grace we share. That’s an incredibly profound statement. Look for that sentence to be a sermon title at some point.

Third (because there must always be three); I’m big on the concept of “the kingdom of Heaven”. I don’t pretend to know what happens after we shed this mortal coil, but whatever’s beyond that veil, it seems pretty clear to me that the kingdom is also here, now. In a significant way the Bible charges us to participate in this kingdom, to tend this garden, to take care of each other, and of the other.

And that’s probably the key point of this parable. The sheep were genuinely surprised to find that they had been ministering to the needs of the King of Kings. We, on the other hand have the benefit of the gospels, the words of Christ our King. We’ve been told in no uncertain terms that we are to see the King first in the poor, the outcast, the stranger wherever and however we find them.

This parable speaks of the physically poor, but I think we also need to include those in our world, and even in our midst, who are emotionally bereft. The parable speaks of physical prisoners, but I think we must also include those in our world, and even in our midst, who are held hostage by fear in a culture where fear has become a predominant theme. The parable speaks of the stranger. In a world where we are all strangers, in our communities, in our neighborhoods, even in our homes, and also here; we are called to reach out, to greet each other in Christian love, reaching across divides of race and class and situation to say that this is a place where all are welcome. This is a place where nobody needs to remain a stranger for very long. This is a place where anyone can find support and companionship along life’s journey.

Yes, a time will come when Christ will ascend his throne arrayed in the robes and trappings of state but if we wait for that day to bow down before him we’ll find ourselves joining our fellow goats on that truck, waiting for the long ride down. On the other hand if we pay attention, if we see Christ in the other, if we care for those who have no way to care for themselves, speak for those who have no voice, offer a word of welcome to all we meet; we’ll find ourselves in the sheepfold; secure, fed, watched over by the good shepherd, Christ the King. Amen.