

The Last Sunday after Pentecost: The Feast of Christ the King  
November 22, 2020: Proper 29 A  
The Episcopal Church of the Atonement  
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*Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Psalm 100; Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46*

Jesus said, *The kingdom of heaven is like* and then he proceeded to tell three parables in a row. And each one ends with judgment—some of it glorious and accepting—as in, ‘*Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.*’ And some of it exclusive and horrifying, as in, ‘*You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.*’ . . .

Two weeks ago, we heard the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids—and those girls who didn’t have enough oil in their lamps were excluded from the wedding feast. And last week, we heard about the slave whose fear of his master led him to exclusion and the gnashing of teeth! And as awful and vivid as all three of these exclusionary, punishing images are, I invite you to turn your back to the devil and hell fire for a moment, and remember that Jesus has told us that what he wants to talk about is *the kingdom of heaven*.

This Sunday, the last Sunday before Advent each year, the church celebrates *The Feast of Christ the King*. And, every four years right around this time, our nation is in the midst of a political transition, and so this feast is the perfect time for people like me to remind all of us that the only king—the only leader—who rules over all people is Jesus. Because, whether the candidate you voted for won or lost our most recent Presidential election, we know very well that the power of the Presidency is nothing compared to the power of God. Jesus was comfortable talking about God as a king—and the presence of God as the kingdom of heaven. Jesus often told his disciples that the kingdom of God was very close to them. That is, Jesus let them know that when they were with him, there were in the presence of God.

All these millennia later, we human beings are drawn to power. You might even say that humans are power-hungry. But it seems to me that human power tarnishes pretty quickly. In fact, in this nation, it is our duty to overturn political power at regular intervals! The power of humans is nothing compared to the power of God. And the best way I know to understand the power of God is to draw closer to Jesus.

In fact, in today’s second lesson, that is exactly what the Apostle Paul prays for in his letter to the church in Ephesus: that as we come to know Jesus more and more, we will know the *hope to which he has called [us]. . . the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and . . . the immeasurable greatness of his power.*

And then we have today’s Gospel: *The kingdom of heaven is like this*: a shepherd who separates the sheep from the goats. And I have to ask, why does a shepherd separate the sheep from the goats? Jesus states it as if we all should know why that would be so. For those who first heard this parable, it was a common place. Of course, not everyone in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine was a shepherd—but those who weren’t had certainly heard the Biblical

stories—like the one we have in today’s first lesson. The prophet Ezekiel uses what the people know about sheep and shepherds to explain the loving care of God. And then he makes a promise: he will set over them a king who started his career as a shepherd! David will become a mighty king—but not before he learns how to be a loving care-taker.

And it doesn’t matter what point in history we examine: the best way to take care of sheep and goats is to separate them at key times—so that the sheep get the shade they need in the summer, and the goats get the shelter they need in the winter. So that the goats get the minerals in their diet that they need, but that the sheep do not get copper poisoning. The shepherd separates the sheep from the goats not because one animal is good and the other animal is bad—he separates them to better take care of each one.

Like the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids, and the harsh master with the slaves of varying abilities, the sheep and the goats are common-place images, designed to draw us in to Jesus’ story. We know how this is going to go, we think! The kingdom of heaven is like: a shepherd who tenderly cares for each little lamb and each little kid!

And wouldn’t it be nice if that was the end of the story? It would be nice, because then we could move on with the service. It would be nice because then we wouldn’t have to worry about providing Thanksgiving dinner for 8% of the people living in Westfield—8%!—because all of us would have enough money to provide our own dinners. It would be nice because then the Westfield Soup Kitchen wouldn’t have to worry about how to let their volunteers know that instead of providing 40 to 50 meals a day, more like 75 or 80 people are showing up these days. It would be nice if all the kingdom of heaven is like is that God takes care of each of us without our having anything to do about it at all.

But just as a shepherd is concerned about the needs and the behavior of every sheep and every goat, the heavenly king is looking at more than simply taking care of the people. In fact, that right there is where the common-place breaks down. Because people are not sheep. And people are not goats, either. Although we have to admit that some of us are ornerier than others. And some of us are smellier than others. And some of us are dumber than others. But really, Jesus isn’t talking about farm animals at all.

The kingdom of heaven is like: people need each other. We human beings need care—**and** we need to be the ones who are doing the care-taking. That give and take—that relationship with the divine *and* the human is what makes us whole. This story is so much better than just a nice little fable.

Most of us know how hard it is to take care of even one person. I will never forget my mother telling me the story of travelling to visit her first grandchild, my niece. She told me that one morning, she and my sister-in-law decided over their morning coffee that they would get dressed and go out shopping. Eight hours later, one-month-old Sally was fed and cleaned and napped and dressed, and Carol and Mom had clothes on too, and they got in the car. My mother’s voice still rings in my ears: “Eight hours! Three college degrees between us and getting one baby ready to put in the car took eight hours!”

We people are a lot of work, right from the very beginning. Jesus knows it. Jesus knows it because he knows us, each one. He tells us: every meal we give away, feeds him. Every chat with someone who is lonely keeps him company. Every drink of water we run to get slakes his thirst. We get to know him, we get to love him, by loving and caring for one another.

Fortunately for us, learning how to care for one another is a process that takes our whole lives to perfect. That same little baby who frustrated her grandmother is now the mother of two little kids herself. And while she is devoted to their care, her Instagram feed suggests that she worries that she is not doing enough.

The truth is, we human beings are not always very good at caring for others. This pandemic has laid bare that fact. We often don't even *want* to take care of others. My mask makes my glasses foggy, we say, as we rip the thing off. Or, I'm so tired, I cannot pick up the phone to check in on my neighbor. Many of us are working really hard to keep a brave face. "I'm okay!" I say, when the truth is, I am tired and lonely and anxious about not knowing what is coming next. It takes an awful lot of energy to keep a brave face—

maybe that would be better energy spent helping out someone else?

I think that is what the Apostle Paul is talking about when he tells the Ephesians that he is praying for them. He prays, *that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him*. It is Paul's conviction that Jesus does not just know how we behave. Jesus us draws us into relationship. And in that relationship, we receive wisdom and revelation so that we *may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe. . . .*

It is that loving relationship with Jesus—that hopeful, glorious, powerful relationship—that makes this parable of judgment so much more than **nice**. On this feast of Christ the King, we do not celebrate a king who is nice. We celebrate a powerful, loving ruler who calls us into life. We are drawn into relationship with Jesus, who teaches us to love by feeding, and visiting, and clothing, and caring. We follow a God who shows power by serving others. We don't have to do it, of course. Jesus isn't threatening the folks who don't care for others so much as he is describing what it will feel like to be set so far apart from God's love.

But it need not be so. Each one of us may follow Jesus and *know . . . the hope to which he has called [us], . . . the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and . . . the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe. . . .*