

5TH SUNDAY IN LENT
MARCH 21, 2015

PASTOR SCOTT FULLER
1ST LUTHERAN, MARSHALL

Psalm 97:1, 6-12; Matthew 25:31-46
Counting Sheep

Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own that in hearing we believe and in believing we obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Picture this scene. Conjure up the image of a parent, at home, alone... with a houseful of kids – like an overnight birthday party.

Most of the children are good, a couple even helpful, and the rest are, well, kids! As the night wears on, the road gets rockier ...until you've finally had it.

- You've bitten your tongue...until it's almost bloody;
 - you've counted to ten...a thousand times over;
 - you've held your composure...
- and now it's pulling apart at the seams.

Then comes that sublime moment...

- when some invisible line is crossed,
- when what was funny becomes infuriating,
- when what was fun becomes frustrating...
- when it's time to read the riot act, to rein in the horses, to lay down the law.

I wonder...I wonder if this might be similar to what **Jesus** was feeling when he shared his parable about the **sheep** and the **goats** and the **final judgement** of all souls.

There are some signs to support the claim that Jesus has *had it*, has *had enough*, has *had it up to here*. For **one** thing, Jesus is **very** close to the **end** of his **ministry**, close to the **end** of his **mission**, close to the **end** of...his **life**. Our story occurs just before his final Passover, when he will say goodbye to family, folks, and friends.



For **another**, his **enemies** are ready to be done with him, ready to **make** their move, ready to **act**. Very soon he will be **betrayed**, he will be **arrested**, he will be **abandoned** and **denied**.

So, if he's a little on edge, it makes sense – the gloves have come off, the die is cast, the stage is set for a most tragic and touching drama. And like our *parent in charge of the party*, maybe *it's time to read the riot act, to rein in the horses, to lay down the law*.

If that's all true, this story about the sheep and goats conveys a pretty clear message. **Can someone share with us what you hear Jesus saying in these words?**

Just like **all** the parables from the last few weeks, so it seems true here with the sheep and goats: those who *do* will be blessed, those who do *not* will be **condemned**.

And that's bothersome to **us**...because **not a word** is said about a person's **faith**, or their **beliefs**, or their **trust in God**. Instead, the world's vision of all that is holy...is suddenly boiled down to two basic elements:

- those who did and those who did not,
- those who are praised and those who are panned,
- those who are welcomed in and those who are kicked out.

This parable seems to challenge the very **foundation** of our Lutheran understanding of **salvation** – right? Let's do a quick review of what we gleaned from Bible School, Confirmation, Worship and Bible Study. **What did we learn about how a person gets into heaven? Anyone?**

Last week Pastor Julie quoted Ephesians, chapter 2, v. 8:

*For by grace you have been saved through faith,
and this is not your own doing;*

it is the gift of God.

-John 3:16 *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*

-Romans 3: *there is no distinction,²³ since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; ²⁴ they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus*

-and Galatians 2:16 *we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ.*

Right??? We **know** this **stuff**. We bleed **salvation by grace through faith** whenever we skin our knees in sin... and yet, **here** we're left holding the image of those sad, sore, sorry **goats**.

Here Jesus seems to say something **radically different**... like: the earth is **flat**, that up is **down**, that there **are** monsters under our beds **and** that the **boogey** man is **real**!

So here's my question to you: if this is true, if this is Jesus unplugged, if this is the Son of Man with his gloves off... then **how would you finish my sermon? What would you say?** That...

-The jig is up?

-Faith is a fancy feeling for fools?

-It doesn't matter **what** you **believe** as long as you do good works?

-God cares more about your **hands** than your **hearts**?

-**No** need to worship or pray – just **do nice things** for others?

Actually, I think we **all** know that it's something **more** than that. On this last weekend before Holy Week, our focus is drawn not **only** to Jesus' **mission** to **save** the **world**, but **also** to that which is **vital** about **God's will for life**.

Our experience of where God (vertical) meets us (horizontal) at its most basic, namely, **when we are hurting**, is here elevated to the utmost importance.

So let's start by exploring the similarities and differences between the sheep and the goats. This story is not about doing the work of humanity without knowing God...both sides are aware of **who the Lord is and what he expects**. **No one** says, *We didn't know that we were supposed to serve you...!* **Nor** is anyone astounded that Jesus, the Lamb of God, is **King and Judge** over all, right?

But there **are** a couple of surprises to note. The **first** is that Jesus, the Lamb and the Judge, ties himself **intimately, incredibly, incomparably** to people who are in need.

Yet...that's not really **news** to us – we know what the **prophets** say about God's concern for the poor and the hungry, the blind and the lame...

And not many weeks ago we heard Jesus himself, at the **beginning** of his ministry, say *Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the weak and blessed are the meek*. No surprise – he says the same thing here at the **end** of his days.

The **second** surprise comes in the fact that the **sheep** were **not** trying to **earn their way into heaven** by *being nice* to the last, the least, the lost and the lowly. **They were motivated by something entirely different**.

The **third** surprise is how the **goats** actually had **their eyes open for Jesus** and would have helped him in a heart-beat... had they seen him...they just never **recognized** him...and so helped no one.

But it's in the **sheep** that we see something **different** at work, something **distinctive**, something...**delightful!** They had their hearts so **opened** by the **Gospel**, that they had absolutely **no** worries about trying to *get into heaven*, **no** cares about *earning God's grace*, **no** concern even for *entertaining angels unawares*. Those dumb sheep were simply moved to help people in need – their family, a stranger, their neighbors, a friend...

And here's the **good news** for you and me. In the **same** way, Jesus invites **us** to open **our** hearts to **God**, our **ears** to the **Gospel** and our **hands** to **all who are in need** ...not to fulfill a **requirement** in order to *get into heaven*, but to fulfill a **vow**, a **promise** of love – both **ours** to **God** and **God's** to those who are **poor**.

I find it fascinating to look at the character of these two groups – identical twins in so many ways.

Neither group saw the **Lord** in the **faces** of the poor.
Neither group suspected that by **helping** the poor they would help **themselves** into **heaven**.

And **both** groups say the very same words: *When did we see you?*

They **are** the very same words **but**, I suspect, they were spoken with completely different tones. From the **sheep**, I'm thinking it's almost **joyful**, like the **punchline** to a **wonderful** joke: *When did we see you???* It's that affirmation of a great relationship with just a tiny bit of regret that we missed being able to talk to one of those people who make you **feel good** just by being in their presence.

But for the **goats**...it seems to me that **their** tone feels almost accusatory: *When did we see you???* They were so busy looking for the king in all the **wrong** places, **that they missed him seeing them through all those hurting and hungry faces**.

No, in the **end**, we can't worry about **doing enough** to earn God's **favor**, to deserve God's **blessing**, to merit God's **grace**. That's a lose/lose situation. It's like someone who can't fall asleep. I've never been able to slip off into slumberland by **scolding** myself and **stewing** about all the sleep that's already slipped away.

No one ever falls asleep by counting sheep; just as no one ever gets into heaven by counting the sheep that they've helped – it's not going to work.

What works, according to theologian Robert Capon, is just **dumb trust**...trust in the **loving relationship** between the **shepherd** and the **sheep**. Says Capon: *Salvation comes only by relationship with the Savior – by a relationship that, from his side, is already an accomplished eternal fact, and that therefore needs only to be **accepted by faith** ...* (Kingdom, Grace, Judgment, p. 510-511).

We will **encounter** goats throughout our lives, we will **act** like goats *every once in a while*, we may **even** at times **berate** the **Son like** the goats for *hiding in the faces of people in need*. But episodes of acting like goats will never be the **end** of the **story**, the end of **our** story, the end of **God's** story.

That ending has already been written – written in the **blood** of the **Lamb who takes away the sins of the world** – yours, mine and ours. Amen.