

Sermon – Matthew 25:31-46
David R. Lyle
Grace Lutheran Church
Christ the King – Year A
22 November 2020

“Goats in Need of the Lamb”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace this day in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Pastor Troy, I'm glad you are here. This is true for several reasons. Am I glad you're here because this is the nineteenth Sunday in a row I've climbed into this pulpit to preach, the thirty-fourth Sunday out of the last thirty-sixth, and I could use a break? Well, sure. There's a bit of that. Am I glad you're here because Grace is a busy place, active and exhilarating but at times exhausting, and we could use some help? Absolutely. Am I glad to have another fan of the Green Bay Packers on staff? Of course! More to the point, however, I'm glad you're here because it is clear to me, as it was to the call committee, that you are gifted for ministry and a good fit for Grace. I can't wait to watch what the Spirit gets up to at Grace as our relationship as pastor and people deepens and grows. All of this is true. You and Ole are blessings to our church and school community. But mostly, Pastor, I'm glad you're here because I need a word. I need a preacher. I don't mean a partner in sharing the preaching duties, although that's true; I mean *I need a preacher*, just like everyone else here at Grace and beyond. A preacher with a word to kill me and bring me back to life, a word that sets me free from sin's chains, free to serve my neighbor. I need a word, and that's never truer than when confronted by the third and final parable of judgment in Matthew 25. We find ourselves standing in judgment before Christ the King. We need a word.
2. Everyone in the story, it seems, has been caught unawares. The parable takes for granted the broken reality in which we find ourselves. There is no

shortage of people who are hungry and thirsty, outcast and naked, sick and imprisoned. Some, the sheep, have been good to these who are the least. Others, the goats, have not. At first blush, I confess that I'm not too worried. I can literally claim to have done all of the required sheepy things, including spending time with captives on the less comfortable side of prison bars. Most of you tuning in can likely stake a similar claim. I mean, compared to *those* goats over *there*, we look okay. Until we take a deeper look, that is. For all the times I've acted like a righteous sheep, how many more times have I been a selfish goat? Can I say I've *never* failed to care for the least of these? Unless Jesus is grading on curve, and a generous one at that, I'm a goat. And so are you. Ezekiel drives home the point as God says, "I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep." The very fact that there are haves and have-nots is an affront to the justice and righteousness of God. It's not that we're horrible, no-good, always-bad sinners. It's that even in spite of our good intentions and the efforts we make from time to time, we remain part of a deeply broken system. We are complicit little goats. And we mostly ignore it, at least until suffering creeps too close for comfort. Commenting on the current state of affairs in our country, Dr. Esau McCaulley of Wheaton College posted this week, "Your theological perspective might be myopic if unrest in America leads you to talk about the end times, but suffering, disease, or famine in parts of Africa does not." Whatever suffering we've tended to, there's plenty we've ignored. When we are honest, we know we are goats. How else to explain the discrepancy between lean and fat sheep? How else to explain the vast suffering in this world, so much of which seems like it should be avoidable? We are goats. On our own, we stand in condemnation. We need a word.

3. This parable marks the end of Jesus' public ministry. One can almost hear him exhale as he says to his disciples in the next breath, "You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified." Standing under judgment, the goats of this world mount the

final rebellion; they put Jesus to death. Jesus, however, understands his death through the lens of the Passover. Trapped and bound in slavery to sin, we need liberation, an exodus in which we cross over from an old reality to the new. Jesus becomes the Lamb, the sinless One whose blood atones for the sake of the world. For you and for me and most certainly for the ones the world calls the least of these, the poor and oppressed who are precious in God's sight. We need a word, and Jesus gives it to us himself, for he *is* the Word. We are goats, but Jesus drives his flock to the foot of the cross where salvation is found. Clothed there in the righteousness of the Lamb, we are sheep for Jesus' sake. In the words of Martin Luther, "If I examine myself, I find enough unholiness to shock me. But when I look at Christ in me, I find that I am altogether holy." Preacher, we need a word. A word that speaks honestly enough to make us know both the judgment we should rightly receive *and* the gracious, merciful reprieve that covers us in Christ, moves us from death to life, and frees us to begin to actually act like sheep in this world.

4. We, dear friends, are goats become sheep for the sake of the Lamb of God. Freed, forgiven, and alive, however, we are *not* simply let off the hook as much as we are caught in the crook of the Shepherd's staff. Jesus has not died so that we can go on living as we did before, trapped in the selfish sin, uncaring of the world around us. As sheep who hear the Word, who know the Shepherd's voice, we're meant to live like, well, sheep! Our failure to measure up to Matthew 25 convicts us, but the grace of God at work in Christ frees us to do precisely what Jesus says. If you see someone hungry or thirsty, give them food and drink. Tend to the outcast, the imprisoned. Clothe the naked and care for the sick. Work unceasingly for justice and righteousness. Yes, it's an overwhelming job. That's why Jesus calls all of us together, to do this work together. In a world that would have us believe it's up to you, to me, to us who have given into the rampant lie of individualism, Jesus calls us together, knits us together as a new flock in Christ. All of us, no matter our gender or

skin color or orientation; no matter how much money we have or don't have in our pockets; we all belong to the Shepherd, and therefore to one another. Take comfort, Pastor. You don't have to do this alone. You just have to help us do it together. Preacher, give us a word. Set us free to love as Jesus loves – a love that gets to work. A faithful love that acts to move the mountains of this world's suffering. Isabel Carter Heyward, one of the first women ordained in the Episcopal Church in this country, writes, "Love does not just happen. We are not love machines, puppets on the strings of a deity called 'love.' Love is a choice – not simply, or necessarily, a rational choice, but rather a willingness to be present to others without pretense or guile. Love is a conversion to humanity – a willingness to participate with others in the healing of a broken world and broken lives."

5. Pastor Troy, I could stand here and try to share the wisdom that has come from my years of ministry, insight that I've accumulated along the way. But I won't. I stand here this morning not in a posture of expertise but of expectation, of yearning, of hunger for the gospel. Give us Jesus, preacher. In the pulpit and at the font, around the Lord's table and at our kitchen tables, in our committee meetings and in our conversations, at our hospital bedsides and at our gravesides. In the midst of this world's sin, suffering, and death, keep preaching the gift of forgiveness, faith, and life. The rest of ministry is details. On our own, we would remain goats. Preach us back to life, the fully woolly life of sheep who belong to Jesus. Freed, point us to where we can find Christ in the world. After all, once we're on the other side of judgment, Jesus tells us in this parable where to find him. We know he is present for us in Word and sacrament; so, too, is he present for us in our neighbor's need. You want to find Jesus, your King? Don't bother with this world's halls of power. Christ is in your neighbor, in her brokenness, in his pain. Go and meet Christ there.

6. The suffering of this world will not last forever. The Kingdom of God will not remain forever hidden. Already Christ reigns, filling all-in-all in mystery impenetrable and majesty incomprehensible. One day we shall gather around the throne, goats transformed into sheep by the Passover victory of the Lamb. Until then, preacher, help us to see. Help us to hear. Give us a word. Give us Jesus, the One who gives himself for us. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep you hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.