

Sermon – Matthew 25:31-46  
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Grace Lutheran Church  
Christ the King – Year A  
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“Flocking to the King”

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. Just eleven years old, Harry Potter stood in the Great Hall at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. He'd only recently learned that he was magical, had only recently made the journey from Platform 9  $\frac{3}{4}$ , but the surprises have just begun for young Harry. On this night in the Great Hall comes the sorting, as these new witches and wizards are sorted into the houses of Hogwarts – Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, Gryffindor, and Slytherin. The sorting hat – old, frayed, and dirty – is brought out. And it sings: “There’s nothing hidden in your head the sorting hat can’t see.” Finally, it’s his turn to wear the hat. Harry finds himself terrified: “A horrible thought struck Harry, as horrible thoughts always do when you’re very nervous. What if he wasn’t chosen at all? What if he just sat there with the hat over his eyes for ages, until Professor McGonagall jerked it off his head and said there had obviously been a mistake and he’d better get back on the train?” Of course, Harry is chosen – Gryffindor it is. But the power of the scene is that we can all relate – from the kickball field during school recess to the job we’re desperate to land. Will we be chosen? Will we measure up? How will we be sorted out?
2. The scene of Harry and his friends in the Great Hall is not so different from our parable this morning, that of the sheep and the goats at the Great Judgment. It’s straightforward enough, and I’m not sure it can be read without a fair amount of terror. This image of the final judgment is one in which all of our deeds will be revealed – including, it seems, those hidden

from ourselves – after which we’ll be sorted out accordingly: sheep to the right, goats to the left, keep it orderly everyone. Those who have done well – feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the imprisoned – these will be invited to inherit the kingdom. And those who have not done well, well, off into eternal punishment you go to spend eternity with the devil and his angels. And the terror here arrives with an honest assessment of myself. To be sure, I’m not that bad a guy. I’d guess that I’m better than most of you! I give money to my church and donations to charities. But have I always met the standard Jesus lays out here? No. Not by a long shot. I have failed in so many ways to feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, give drink to the thirsty. Yes, I support ministries and charities that help, but I have also failed along the way. And so have you; of this I am quite sure. So what is it then? Are we all goats?

3. We read Jesus’ parable this morning in context. This is the teaching that Jesus saves for the end of his ministry; after this, it’s headlong into his passion and death. So what’s the last thing Jesus wants us to know? That we’re all goats. Just look at us. If we had a handful of true sheep among us, we wouldn’t have this world, filled with hunger and thirst. There’s not one among us who merits “sheephood” according to the terms of this parable. So what are we to do? Where are we to turn? We look to what happens when Jesus’ teaching is over and his suffering begins. We look to Jesus, who enters into eternal suffering and punishment on our behalf and defeats it for our sake. We look to Jesus, not a sheep or a goat but the very Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Because of the Lamb, we goats become sheep. We, who were goats, are now sheep on account of the Lamb of God. We will not find salvation in what we have done, but salvation will find us because of what Jesus has done.
4. But that’s not all, of course, for the parable is not simply about justification but about what happens in the lives of the justified. The parable is not meant

only to condemn us and drive us to the mercy of Christ; it's also a vision of what happens when Christ comes to us with mercy. A vision of a new kind of kingdom with a new kind of king. A king who, unlike any earthly ruler, truly values the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned. Values them so much that he tells he is to be found in their very needs; that if we want an audience with the king, it will not happen in a Great Hall; no, we will find our king when we kneel at our neighbors' feet, meeting their needs in love, and seeing Christ looking out from their eyes. It is a kingdom in which all, finally, will be put to rights. And it's a kingdom in which we are called to participate right now. Jesus is always inviting you to help – just look in the yellow announcements! Jesus is a homeless man who needs a sleeping bag, a needy family who could be blessed by Christmas gifts. These are not mere acts of charity; they are ministries to Jesus, for he lives in the needs of these neighbors.

5. But there's one more move to make, for we're in danger of seeing ourselves only as those who once were goats but now are sheep, and the danger is that we turn the people with needs into objects to be fixed. For we, too, are people in need. And if Jesus is to be met in the needs of my neighbors, then Jesus is in my needs, too. My hunger for meaning, my thirst for justice, the nakedness of my bruised and battered soul, the imprisonment of my life to sin. Today, Jesus invites us to just let it all go; to admit that we cannot and need not be kings or queens of our own lives, striving after perfection and trying to measure up. No, we can rest back into the loving care of Jesus and his kingdom as others love, serve, and minister to us – just as we are.
6. In his recent book, *How God Became King*, N.T. Wright notes that, "If you belong to Jesus the Messiah, if his Spirit dwells in you, if you are a worshipper of the one true God, maker of heaven and earth – then however you may feel at the moment, whether you are sick or healthy, handsome or jaded, you are simply a shadow of your future self. God intends to transform the "you" you

are at the moment into a being – a full, glorious, physical being who will be much more truly “you” than you’ve ever been before. Sin, by distorting and downgrading our specific God-given capacities and vocations, makes us more and more alike in our degradation. Jesus makes us more and more alive in our uniqueness, and the resurrection will complete that in a great act of new creation.”

7. In other words, yes, we’ve all become a bit too goatish. But by the grace of the Lamb of God, you have become sheep. The great sorting has already happened, and for Jesus’ sake the kingdom is yours. Fear not! You’re in! You’ve made it! Thanks be to God and to the Lamb, this king who loves and claims us as his own, sending us forth to serve those who are the least, last, lost, and lowest, because that is where we will find our king. 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.