



## “Stop Me if You’ve Heard This One Before”

Text: Matthew 25:31-46

*a sermon by Kevin Fleming*

**November 26, 2017**

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

We gather for worship on the final Sunday of the liturgical year. Next week, with the beginning of Advent, we begin a new year – technically “Year B” of the lectionary cycle. Our worship year ends on a Sunday that we call “Christ the King” or “The Reign of Christ.” Our new year begins as we prepare ourselves for the coming of Christ, not only as the Baby of Bethlehem, but as the Sovereign Ruler of the Universe at the end of time. So, there is a certain symmetry to our liturgical calendar.

This particular celebration is a newcomer to the church, having been added to the Christian calendar in 1925, by Pope Pius XI. He suggested that it be celebrated on the last Sunday of October, immediately prior to the Feast of All Saints. Protestant churches adopted the celebration, but moved it to the last Sunday of the church year.

Pope Pius felt that the day was important because it reminds us all that if Christ is ever to be Lord of the Universe, Christ must first become Lord of our lives. Pius wrote, “He must reign in our minds, which should assent with perfect submission and firm belief to revealed truths and to the doctrines of Christ. He must reign in our wills, which should obey the laws and precepts of God. He must reign in our hearts, which should spurn natural desires and love God above all things, and cleave to him alone. He must reign in our bodies and in our members, which should serve as instruments for the interior sanctification of our souls, or to use the words of the Apostle Paul, as instruments of justice unto God.”<sup>1</sup>

So the question before us today is, how do we live in a place and time, when our allegiances and loyalties are sought by so many, as loyal and faithful disciples of Jesus Christ? What does it mean to be “Christian” in our world right now? How are we to live our faith?

The passage assigned for this day is the “The Sheep and the Goats” or “The Great Judgment,” depending on how you want to approach it. We’ve all heard this story in its original form and we’ve all seen various interpretations of it in everything from movies, to commercials, to plays, and to literature. At some point a great separation takes place and two groups are formed – sheep and goats. One group is rewarded while the other is condemned. Stop me if you’ve heard this one before.

Those who are rewarded don’t understand why they are being rewarded. Those who are being condemned don’t understand why they are being condemned. And it all comes down to being able to recognize the presence of Christ. “When did we ever see you in need?” the righteous ask. “What you for and to the least of these – sick, hungry, homeless, oppressed, imprisoned – you do to me.” And the unrighteous, by implication, seem to say, “If we had known that was you, Lord, we would have behaved differently.” There seems to be confusion among the sheep as to why they are sheep and among the goats as to why they are goats.

And, maybe even more interestingly, this isn’t a parable about church people. This is a parable about “the nations.” At the beginning of the story, it doesn’t say, “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the church folk will be gathered before him...” It says, “All the nations will be gathered before him...” I’m not sure that Jesus meant this story only for the people in the church. This is a story about how we live together as people – religious and non-religious, republican and democrat, rich and poor, black, brown, and white. This is about God’s vision for our world. This is about the way God intended us to live together.

The story tells us something about God. This story reminds us that God is not removed from us, far away on a distant cloud, or sitting on a great throne of judgment. What Jesus is reminding us about in this story is that God is right here – right now – with us. And God is not exclusively in the rich and powerful and prestigious. God is with us in the poor, the weak, the abused, the forgotten, the imprisoned, the sick, the hungry, and the thirsty. God is with us in our neighbors who need us most. God is with us in those who are denied economic justice, in those who are overlooked in the name of progress, in those who are passed by yet again so that those with so much can have some more.

In our world, we are taught to curry favor with those who can do us good. We are taught to “play the game,” in order to move up. We endear ourselves to those with money and power, hoping that a little of their money and power will come our way.

But in this parable, Jesus seems to be telling us that if we are looking for God, we will not find God in the corridors of power, or in the board rooms, or in the back rooms where decisions are made. If we want to find God, we must look for God in the places where there is pain, in the places where hunger is an everyday occurrence, in the places where tears are shed by parents who are powerless to care for their families, in the places where a single illness can devastate a family. God is to be found among the powerless, the rejected, the forgotten, the victimized, the maligned, and the abused, according to Jesus. If you’re looking for God, that’s where God can be found.

This is also a story about religion. You cannot hear the news, or read a newspaper, or listen to a radio account, without hearing of nearly unbelievable accounts of horrible things being said and done in the name of religion. Go back in history and read again the tales of those hooded bands of church-going Christians, known as the Ku Klux Klan, and the evils they committed in the name of Christianity. Read the stories of Muslims in worship in a mosque in Egypt, being attacked while they were at prayer, and over 300 killed. Read the stories of people in churches, in Texas, in South Carolina, and in so many other places, where someone comes in a guns them down. Relive the morning of 9/11 and be reminded of what twisting religion can make people do.

Listen to the religious hucksters and con artists who bilk people out of their money, using fear and guilt and the threat of judgment. Watch the stories of religious leaders currying the favor of politicians, hoping that some of their power and prestige rub off on them. Read the accounts of those who were abused by “religious” men who were never prosecuted for their evils perpetrated against “the least of these.”

When religions and their leaders become more interested in gaining power, and money, and prestige, than they are about caring for those who have been stepped over in our power structures, they become goats – unrighteous ones who failed to recognize the Christ in their midst. In their search for earthly gain, they missed the basic ethic of Christian life. That ethic is simply, “...just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

Finally, this story is about each of us. In that respect, it’s not about finances, it’s not about politics, it’s not about which religion or no religion. In the final analysis, this is a story about each of us and how we are going to model our lives on the person of Jesus Christ and how we are going to live that ethical way of life he came to teach us. God doesn’t just want the world to be made new, based on the way, truth, and life exhibited in Jesus Christ. God wants each of us to be made new, based on the way, truth, and life exhibited in Jesus Christ.

God wants to make us new by closely encountering God in those miraculous moments when we find God all around us and right in front of us. God wants to save us from being consumed by our own wants and desires, and instead focus our energies and efforts on those who have needs and necessities. God wants to make us whole by teaching us that life is not to be found by amassing wealth, and power, and prestige. God wants to remind us of the secret truth of life – that to love is to live.

And that takes us back to Pope Pius XI and the reason for this day. “He must reign in our minds, which should assent with perfect submission and firm belief to revealed truths and to the doctrines of Christ. He must reign in our wills, which should obey the laws and precepts of God. He must reign in our hearts, which should spurn natural desires and love God above all things, and cleave to him alone. He must reign in our bodies and in our members, which should serve as instruments for the interior sanctification of our souls, or to use the words of the Apostle Paul, as instruments of justice unto God.”<sup>2</sup>

If Christ is ever to be King of the Universe – if the Realm of Christ is ever to break through into our world – then Christ must become the Lord of our lives here-and-now.

Sheep and goats. Stop me if you’ve heard this one before. For now and evermore. Amen.

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1.) Pius XI, *Quas Primus*

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