

Matthew 25:31-46 Christ the King 2011

Mission Possible

When I finally sat down to get a sermon on paper for today, I have to confess I started hearing the theme music and opening lines of the 60's TV version of Mission Impossible.

Dat-da, da-dat da, da... *"Stephanie Parker, your mission should you choose to accept it, is to preach on one of Jesus' most difficult teachings on judgment while at the same time delivering an uplifting, touchy-feely sermon for Celebration Sunday---remember the salvation of all the souls in your pews as well as the future spiritual and financial vitality of this parish depends upon your ability to succeed in this task. This imaginary interior dialogue will self destruct in 30 seconds..."*

So here we are, on the last Sunday of the Church year which we call Christ the King. This is the day when we contemplate the universal rule of God, as expressed in Christ as the Shepherd King. We are invited to grasp the fact that no over-reaching earthly power is ultimately greater than the love of Christ our King. It is meant to be an occasion for celebration and rejoicing.

But just as we are starting to relax into the celebration we are thrust headlong into this difficult and demanding parable of judgment. We trip over our possible lassitude and land face first into a sheep and goat pen where the grand daddy of all separations is taking place: sheep to the right please, stay here with me in eternal life, and all goats go to the left, yes---that's right---just go right on through the fiery furnace into eternal damnation and punishment.

With the passage of time, some of the hard edges of the difficult teachings from our scripture have been worn smooth and dull by their familiarity. This passage, however, still spills out over us with a flow of words that leave us confused and troubled. These words of judgment from Jesus are hard words to confront I personally might love to dodge them.

But Jesus' Truthfulness is uncompromising. So, as faithful Christians we are called this day to examine the true nature of our understanding of God's judgment upon those God so lovingly created.

The nature of God's judgment has long been a fearful and confusing question for us. I know many people who profess a loving and merciful life-giving God who can turn in an instant to the belief that the outer darkness is the penalty paid for an imperfect life.

The judgment of God in Christ is a very different proposition I promise you! Christ the King's judgment is merciful and loving and seeks only to save us from ourselves. Christ's love so wishes our joy that it is ruthless against everything in us that diminishes our joy and robs us of wholeness.

It is important to remember the context of what has been for us these several weeks of parables of judgment. Jesus is sharing these parables with his disciples in those last few days before his arrest and crucifixion. Now the *theme* of judgment *is* present in Jesus' teaching from the early days of his ministry. He has made no equivocation that he meets us in a time of crisis; a time of decisive, history altering *and* history fulfilling action by God.

But as we gather speed toward the inevitable collision between Christ's love and our need to dominate and control through power and oppression, Jesus' teaching takes on a whole new level of intensity and purpose.

Today as we encounter "The Great Judgment" in the parable of the sheep and the goats, there is one overriding fact that I want to assert---- and that is the sheer needlessness of fear. I want to emphasize the utter waste of time that can be found in dreading God.

Christians spend an unbelievable amount of time and energy imagining demands or necessities placed upon us by God that simply have no rhyme or reason; we waste precious and life-giving time creating God in the image of our own fears or prejudices.

And all the while Jesus is calling the human family to lay down their arms, believe in God's love for all and to embrace one another with sloppy, unlimited grace and forgiveness. As Robert Capon says, "God isn't trying to hurt anyone; God's not even mad at anyone. In fact there are no lengths to which God will not go (or has not already gone) to prove that there are no restrictions on the joy which God wants to share with us."¹

Now---at this moment you might rightly say, "Stephanie, that's all well and good, but we have just traveled through lots of weeks with images of separation, outer darkness, and the weeping and gnashing of teeth---not to mention today's little line about eternal punishment! So what's that all about?"

Well, as Capon goes on to tell us, today's parable delivers the biggest clue: Jesus goes out of his way to tell us that the Son of Man "will separate them one from another *as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.*" In the heart of the judgment we are reminded that Jesus, the Good Shepherd is our final judge.

¹ Robert Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment, Paradox Outrage, and Vindication in the parables of Jesus*. Pg 504.

The Good Shepherd is the one who lays down his life for his sheep *and for his goats*. Any separation that happens still happens within the love and care of our Shepherd King; in Jesus the justice *and mercy* of the judge are ultimately one. In the end, the one who judges us most finally is the one who loves us most fully.²

The one who judges us most finally will be the one who loves us most fully.

We just waste far too much time fretting over the judgment of God when in fact we are far more harsh judges of ourselves and others than God has ever been. This is a colossal waste of precious time.

We waste time and energy on what Joan Chittister calls infantile and individualistic notions of sin, judgment, accountability and morality. While our individual lives matter, Jesus' focus, indeed all of Scripture's focus, is on who we are as a community of the faithful, who we are as a people of God.

As God's people our call is far bigger than our individual failures to reach some notion of moral perfection; our true call as a community is to show forth hope---hope for the reign of God.

As a community of faith we are meant to pledge ourselves to do everything we can to make God's hope for the world a reality. In the end when we stand before Christ the King the question will be "did you love" not "did you sin." Because you see if we have been loving individuals who come together to form a community that is redolent with God's loving mercy and grace, well the rest of our small imperfections, personal and corporate, will be meaningless.

The question will not be "How many times did you fail?" But, "how many times did you forgive and rise again with hope after you failed?"

Today we celebrate our life, worship and mission as a people gathered and called by God into this place into this time. And we are reminded that through the inscrutable mystery of God we will not always recognize when or where we are serving Christ in others. We need only be aware that Christ is most often to be found hiding behind the places and faces of suffering people.³

We know that there is never a shortage of suffering people. Starting right here in our spiritual home, you can be sure that sitting in our midst are people who are suffering in silence. Some are isolated and lonely beyond imagining, some are watching their lives crumble to a bad mortgage or unemployment, and some are even suffering because of bullies young and old; young bullies most often grow into old bullies and they still populate our workplaces and churches.

And of course once we step out these doors we do not have to travel far to find the stranger needing welcome, the prisoner, the naked, hungry or thirsty.

It can feel overwhelming, but the way forward is clear. Week after week we gather and learn how to love and show compassion for one another inside these walls and then we make a plan for how to go out into the streets and our workplaces as a people of transformation and hope.

As we bring our pledges to this table and offer them to God we are investing in a promise; a promise to not only speak of God's mercy and grace, but to make it so in the flesh week in and week out; to practice God's love within and without; spending ourselves without counting the cost in a world that hungers and thirsts to be introduced to God's hope and mercy.

It is community and mission combined that creates vitality and hope. Mission without true community lacks transformation and a community without mission will collapse into itself. As we continue to create real, loving community with one another what we can accomplish for God outside these walls is unlimited.

So in the end maybe my mission wasn't so impossible after all; perhaps judgment and celebration are not so hard to reconcile—maybe they are in fact the crucible of faith; when perfect love is our judge, the final verdict is always to throw a party; a party to which all of us, sheep and goats alike, are invited to feast at the table of our King! Amen.

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² Frederick Beuchner, *Wishful Thinking, A Seeker's ABC's*, Pg 59.

³ Edward Markquart, *Lectionary Homiletics*, Volume 16, pg 81.