

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer  
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
11/23/2008, in preparation Christ the King Sunday  
Matthew 25:31-46

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our Gospel Reading this morning starts off with mention of the angels. Here is that text:

<sup>31</sup>When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and *all the holy angels* with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory: <sup>32</sup>And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats: (Matthew 25:31-32, KJV)

Of all the souls gathered together on that great and awesome day when Christ the King divides the sheep from the goats, I especially wish I could know what was on the heart of the anonymous angel of the Christmas story. He had been privileged to interpret the meaning of the birth of the Christ Child to the shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flocks by night. The words of this particular angel have been cherished in the church ever since and provide a most fundamental sermon on what the birth of Jesus means for our world. I bet we almost know that angelic message by heart. Soon, on Christmas Eve, we will be glad to hear these words read aloud once again:

<sup>9</sup>And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. <sup>10</sup>And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to *all people*. <sup>11</sup>For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.(Luke 2:9-11, KJV, my emphasis)

Note that phrase, “to all people.” That is how big Christmas is! It is good tides of great joy, which shall be to all people. And now, on the day of the great and final Judgment Day, *all people* are gathered before the Christ the King, and that angel looks on and perhaps wonders to himself along lines like these:

I am deeply curious how this is going to turn out. Of one thing I am certain: that Christ the King is a miracle of grace and love in the midst of reality, in the very heart of the universe. But how is he going to exercise that love in this Final Judgment?

I cannot help but feel disappointed in some of the people of earth. I brought to earth the most wondrous news possible. I sang my heart out along with all the heavenly host, “Glory to God in the highest and peace to his people on earth!” Yet, I fear that some of the people of earth have not found peace, nor did they find goodness.

Why! The matters at issue here are not irksome, nor are they beyond the ability of people to do. The King does not ask that people *heal* the sick, but

only that they *visit* them. This is within the power even of the poor. Though they might not have medical skill to give, nor even a few pennies to give to the sick, still they can give themselves, they can help relieve that awful loneliness of the sick room by their presence and by their prayers. Why did they not do so?

And the angel continues, thinking of the prisoners: It is the same with the prisoner. Christ the King does not ask people to somehow convert guilt into innocence, nor to set the prisoner free, to arrange some jail escape or something. No, the King of all Creation simply asks the people of earth to visit the imprisoned. He asks that the rejected of the world not be rejected by all the people, but that we be the ones to visit the imprisoned.

And the angel continues, thinking of the hungry, the thirsty, and the naked: The king did not ask for a feast and sumptuous clothing for the poor, but that they be fed and clothed. Soup and bread, coat and gloves, even the poor can give something to the poor, and I have seen it: I have seen plenty of poor people on the subway reach into their purse and give some money to the beggar in the aisle. Why did not these goats do such a simple thing?

And most heartbreaking of all, the King is not asking that the people of earth do *all* of these deeds of love, but simply some of them, or even one of them. But no, the goats did not none. They did not even welcome the stranger. What harm would it have done, to have given a smile, a handshake, some helpful advice? But no, the King has reviewed the list and each case the truth is that the goat did none of these things. He did not feed the hungry, nor cloth the naked, nor welcome the stranger, nor visit the sick or the imprisoned. And what an arid human life that is — to have done no deeds of compassion at all!

Now, how is my Lord, sweet Jesus, going to exercise his love toward such unloving people?

And so it is that the Christmas angel beholds the Great and Final Judgment and wonders about the cold-hearted people of our world.

When it comes to the Final Judgment, the whole point is to restore righteousness to all of creation – to finally establish justice, once and for all. I think we can all agree that this would be a good thing! Loving service to others is the bottom line. Charity – that is what our Lord Jesus desires of us. And he gives us opportunity after opportunity – wherever we are and whoever we may be. The person sitting next to you right this very moment may be in need of a kind word of hope and encouragement, a smile, or a shoulder to lean upon. Your next door neighbor might need someone to talk to - someone who will listen with compassion and understanding. Someone else may need some grocery shopping or help getting to a doctor's appointment. The nurse who at your doctor's appointment might be having a bad day and need your sympathy and understanding. Just as the rich man did not need to go beyond his gate to encounter Lazarus, we need only look around and we will see the faces of those who are in need of

some loving tender care. When you see those faces, look closely and you will see the face of Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

In the second half of this sermon, I mean to include what I call a “Biblical speculation.” I am drawn to this thought by sympathy for what I think is on the heart of some of you, or might be on your heart farther on down the road.

So, let me pause a bit to explain the category of Biblical speculation. It refers to the reality that the witness of the Bible is very rich, and for some topics of earnest interest to folks, no one teaching seems adequate. No one stance seems capable of proclaiming the fullness of witness. And so, whatever the preacher says is inadequate, though it might well contain some important truth.

I am pointing, here, to a Pauline phenomenon in the New Testament. You might recall that at one point at least, St. Paul tries to distinguish what he is saying from what the Lord has said in the commandments. I am referring to St. Paul’s discussion of the life of celibacy for the unmarried and widows. Here is the passage. It comes from First Corinthians Chapter 7:

<sup>6</sup>But I speak this *by permission*, and not of *commandment*. <sup>7</sup>For I would that all men were even as I myself. But every man hath his proper gift of God, one after this manner, and another after that. <sup>8</sup>I say therefore to the unmarried and widows, It is good for them if they abide even as I. <sup>9</sup>But if they cannot contain, let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn.(1 Cor. 7:6-9, KJV)

*For us*, the brothers and sisters of Paul, this teaching in favor of celibacy is indeed the very word of God and so we can never dismiss it, but must always try to plumb its depths. And yet, I believe that St. Paul does well to be modest in this particular teaching because, after all, the actual commandment of God is in favor of marriage, not celibacy. This is one of our great Lutheran Reformation insights.

Likewise, what I now want to say about the Last Judgment is no more than Biblical speculation. It is an attempt to meditate on our Bible story, but it addresses a question that is not addressed by the text itself, and if it were addressed, there would be a complex richness of Biblical teaching that would be hard to put into any one teaching.

I can only say that as I have grown older, it has seemed important to me to sometimes raise Biblical speculations in order to signal to you and to me that the contrary positions we might be holding might not be the gospel truth either, but rather our honorable but incomplete attempts to phrase a rich and complex Biblical witness.

In any case, I turn now to my Biblical speculation. Soon I will leave off such speculations and finish with what I am more confident is the gospel truth. Here goes. My text is this one;

<sup>37</sup>Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink?’

What I am wondering is, does this text hold out the hope that if we make it to the right hand of the King, so that we are happy there amongst all the other sheep, that if we

---

<sup>1</sup> This wonderful paragraph is built on one from my wife’s, Carol Fryer’s, sermon for this day.

look to our neighbor sheep to our side, that particular sheep might be an *unbeliever*? An unbeliever who must now deal with Jesus, King of Kings and Lord of Lords. I hope so. After all, that one to your side now, that one who has claimed your heart, that one who might claim your heart someday, might be an unbeliever.

It seems to me that there are an awful lot of good-hearted people in this world who do not yet know Christ. Some of them hardly had a chance. They just were not raised that way. Indeed, in this very big world, they might have been raised in one of the other world religions, or in some obscure religion, or they might have been raised by their parents to be atheists or indifferent to spiritual matters. And this might become increasingly so in a world becoming ever more secular. But they are good people nonetheless.

Let's note the Biblical points about this happy possibility that the flock on the right will include unbelievers. I am not saying that it is true — just that I hope it is true and that I believe it is an honorable hope, with some Biblical support.

So, first off all, let us notice the way the parable begins, especially its reference to “all the nations”:

<sup>32</sup>Before him will be gathered *all the nations*, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats...

If Jesus had said “all the *Christians*” will be gathered before the King, then we could have conceived the Last Judgment as sorting out the faithful Christians from the hypocrite Christians — the pretend Christians who claimed to be people of faith, but whose lives manifest nothing of it. If this were so, then the people on right hand would all be Christians — true, blue believers. The hypocrites would be on the left, and as for the unbelievers, we would not know one way or the other based on this morning's parable.

But Jesus does not say that “all the Christians” will be gathered before the King, but rather a much bigger population — all the nations. And does it not seem an honorable reading of the text to say that that which sorts out the people is not so much their faith, but their charity.

It puts me in mind of St. Paul's culminating line in First Corinthians 13. In the King James Version it goes thus:

And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.(1 Cor 13:13, KJV)

The modern translation changes the matter none. Instead of “charity” it speaks of “love”:

So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.(1 Cor. 13:13, RSV)

But that too is the issue in this parable: Did the people of the nations conduct themselves with love toward the poor and hungry? If so, they are approved. They are approved!

So, that is my first point: It appears to be the case that the nations stand before the King and are sorted out according to their charity.

Next, notice how startled everyone is. When they did their deeds of kindness, they did not know that they were ministering to Jesus himself. They simply thought they were ministering to the poor.

Perhaps it did not dawn on them that they were simultaneously ministering to Jesus when they ministered to the poor because they did not know Jesus at all. They were not raised that way. They were simply trying to do some good in this world. God had placed a desire in their heart, as he places a desire in all hearts, that they should be people of love, and they obeyed that desire. Not knowing Jesus, they nonetheless obeyed the desire he placed within them. Not all people do that, but these did.

And now, in glory, they look up and are stunned to realize that their benevolence reached out and touched not only the poor, but also Jesus. They did not know that Jesus so pities the poor that their suffering is *his* suffering and their relief is *his* relief. And so, they innocently ministered to the poor and now, on Judgment Day, they are surprised to learn that they thereby ministered to Christ himself.

For the Christians, this ought not to be such a surprising thought. We have known all along about the sympathy of Jesus for the needy people of our world. Indeed, that is why he came to earth, to die saving a world that stood in awful need of saving. He so sympathized with a world in need that he became one of us. His blessed incarnation teaches us of his identification with the needy.

And then, by the time of the Last Judgment, Christians should have learned the story of St. Paul: the way the resurrected Lord Jesus explained to the man, along the road to Damascus, that to persecute Christians was simultaneously to persecute *him*!

And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou *me*?(Acts 9:4, KJV)

And so, the Christians among the sheep on the right hand might have been surprised on Judgment Day to learn that they were ministering to Jesus when they were charitable to the poor. But the ones who would be *really* surprised by it would be the good-hearted unbeliever — the one who does not yet know Jesus, but served him nonetheless via deeds of compassion.

But chief of all, I am thinking of the parable of the Good Samaritan. There, the hero was neither a Christian, nor a Jew, but a Samaritan — a member of a competing religion. It does not sound unreasonable to me to imagine that in that great crowd of sheep to the right of the King stands the Good Samaritan, unbeliever though he is in the eyes of Israel and the Church. And if the Good Samaritan stand there, why not that good one who has captured our heart, yet is not a believer?

So far, I have been preaching speculations. That is, I have been trying to preach honorable interpretations of the text, but without the ability to claim that they are certain or that other interpretations might not be better.

But now I can put off speculations and draw some conclusions that do seem certain to me:

First all, if your beloved is an unbeliever, then among your dates, include some Saturday mornings working in our Meals on Heels program. You can cook meals for the frail elderly in our neighborhood or deliver such meals. Or do something else like that. The one certain thing about this parable is that Christ the King desires charity. It is an old, old lesson of the Bible. And so, the prophet Hosea says,

For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice...(Hosea 6:6, KJV)

And Amos says:

But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.(Amos 5:24, RSV)

And so, let both you and your beloved be benevolent. Let charity be part of your life. Visit the sick and the imprisoned. Give food and water to the hungry and clothes to the naked. Actually do these things.

Second, a word to us Christians. This parable of the Last Judgment should stir us onwards toward good works. It is not enough to say, "Lord, Lord." It is not enough to boast, "I have faith, I have faith." We must also busy ourselves with works of love in this world.

And third, a word to you unbelievers: You might not know it now, nor believe it, nor think it has anything to do with you, but the Church believes that one day you will open your eyes and see Jesus. St. Paul puts the matter this way:

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, <sup>10</sup>that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, <sup>11</sup>and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.(Philippians 2:9-11, RSV)

But please note this, and in noting it, ponder your path henceforth: If you make it with your beloved to the right hand of Christ the King, it will indeed be Jesus Christ who is the King.

But this is nothing to be regretted because Jesus has always loved you, indeed, enough to die for you. And I do believe that he is worthy of being your King even now! He knows that of which he speaks. He knows what it means to pour out your strength and your resources for the sake of others, for he has poured out his blood and his very life for others, including you and me.

To Jesus, the great teacher and practitioner of love, aye, the one who is King of all Creation, be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.