



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

In the name of the loving, liberating, and life-giving God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

Today's gospel is the last of a series of parables where Matthew has been busy separating characters into two groups. Have you noticed that? Two weeks ago, it was the wise bridesmaids and the foolish bridesmaids, which was then followed by the Parable of the Talents, where it was the trustworthy slaves and the wicked slaves. And this week we have the story of the good sheep and the bad goats.

And notice that each of these parables feature the imminent return of either a groom or the owner, or in this case the king, whose arrival in each case spells big trouble for those in the bad group, whether it's getting locked out of the banquet, being cast out into outer darkness, or in today's gospel, eternal punishment for those poor goats. Fire and brimstone, weeping and gnashing of teeth, right? All that stuff that we thought we left behind in the Old Testament, right here. Thank you, Gospel of Matthew.

And so both Pastor Manish and I in our homilies, we've been reminding us to resist the temptation to read these parables as straightforward morality tales. Because for one, that's simply not what a parable is. And when you do, these parables come off as little more than simple "you better be good" tales. Really not that different from a popular Christmas song, right? You know the one about the man in the long white beard who's also coming to town? Who's also got a list separating the naughty from the nice?

Such a one-dimensional reading not only robs these parables of their magic and their ability to challenge our expectations and to make us wonder, but they rob God of all of God's mercy and unending grace and forgiveness. But thankfully, we're good Episcopalians, or at least Episcopalian adjacent for some of you, I know, so that we have a natural intuition that the parables of Jesus may be just a bit more nuanced than a child's fable.

So what might be going on here? I think the key for me is in the surprise. Did you catch that? Neither the sheep nor the goats have any idea that they were either serving Jesus or ignoring Jesus. The goats, they thought they were doing the right thing. They might have even been able to try to follow Jesus. It's just that the place they thought they were being led wasn't to anyone actually in need. They may have believed all the right things, recited the right creeds, went to the right church, sang the right hymns, said the right prayers. But at the end of the

day, their faith was never allowed to actually change their life. It was just a kind of religious veneer, a thin, shiny coat atop an otherwise untransformed life.

And so they are surprised to learn that they missed out on Jesus because they were just doing what everybody else does. Staying busy, climbing the ladder, chasing the American dream, keeping up with the Joneses, and making themselves so stressed out and exhausted, they never had the time or the energy to do much worrying about anyone else. You see, we goats, we have important things to do, do we not? Going out of our way to serve the poor, well, it's exactly that. Out of our way. It's fundamentally an interruption in our life.

The sheep, on the other hand, they were also surprised but for the opposite reason. They didn't think they were doing anything special. They were just being normal. They weren't trying to look good or earn a reward. They weren't trying to avoid any punishment or keep from feeling guilty. No, for them, helping others wasn't an interruption in their life. It was their life. In fact, we don't even know if these sheep were Christians, do we? Jesus doesn't mention one thing about their beliefs, whether they were baptized, or what creeds they confessed, or what scriptures they read. Jesus only cares about whether they cared for the poor and that they did so from their heart.

For Jesus, becoming a sheep seems to mean moving beyond all of those outside motivations we goats sometimes have, you know, guilt, obligation, showing off, measuring up, trying to look good, padding that college application, getting that tax deduction, getting our name up on a plaque somewhere. All that stuff for sheep, it comes from a place that is utterly internal. Helping the least is simply who you are.

And don't get me wrong, you know, carrots and sticks, they have their place, right? Parents, are you with me on that? We all start somewhere. We all start trying to teach our kids good behaviors that way. But Jesus is reminding us that in the spiritual life, just like in the real life, it's an okay place to start but it's not where you want to end. No matter how much of a helicopter parent you might try to be, you can't chase your kids around their whole life trying to manipulate them into doing the right thing. At some point, we have to step back and let the Holy Spirit take root in their heart and in ours.

And I think that's part of the message here on this Christ the King Sunday, when we proclaim the supremacy of the way of Christ over the ways of the world. And we celebrate a kingdom like no other, a kingdom based not on power and control or manipulation, but a kingdom that is built upon surrender and self-giving love. Not some far off realm, but something that is already here. Something that Jesus says is already within us. The kingdom of God is within you, Jesus says. It's not a place that we must earn our way into, but a state of

consciousness we awaken to. A new sight that allows us to see Christ in everyone.

And if that sounds a bit ethereal, think back to the great commandment where Jesus says to love our neighbors as ourselves. He's not just saying, treat them the same way. He's describing a state of mind where there is no longer any separation between us and them, between me and between you. When we see each other as an extension of our very selves. Where my thriving is dependent on your thriving. Where my integrity intertwined with yours. That's when we stop practicing charity and start experiencing kinship. Where it's no longer about serving the poor, but about being in relationship with them. Such that there is no longer any "them" but just "us."

That's the journey for us goats. Not to avoid punishment but to escape the self-made hell of self centeredness and endlessly trying to keep up and to measure up and to win an unwinnable rat race by finding a new site that begins with finding the Christ within so that I can see the Christ in you.

And if that's still a little vague, here's an everyday example that may help. Think about a time when you drove up to a stoplight, and standing there is a homeless person holding a sign, "Anything will help." Yeah? Now we goats, we are busy people, and many of us probably drive right on by without even looking up. Besides, we know that it's easier if you don't look them in the eye, don't we? But if we do, it's hard not to be hit without at least a little crisis of conscience, isn't it? After all, we should do something, shouldn't we?

Ah, but us goats, locked as we are in our judgmental, calculating minds, as loud as that should might be, ringing in our ears, it's not too hard to talk us out of doing much of anything. After all, I've heard that many of them have an addiction of some kind. Won't my handout just be enabling them? And besides, isn't this what I pay my taxes for? I mean, homelessness is a systemic problem. Where's the government when you need them? And what is my \$5 going to really do anyway? This is way too big, their problems far too big for that. Oh, and come to think of it, I think I read something on the internet that some of these people are actually a scam. How do I know that's even legit? On and on it goes, rolling around my little goat mind goes until the light changes and off I go. Out of sight, out of mind.

So what about the sheep? How might they experience that differently? Well, imagine this time when you pull up to that stoplight, you suddenly realize that the homeless person is your grandmother. Imagine what you would do differently. You'd stop the car, wouldn't you? You'd turn on the emergency lights, you'd hop out, you'd run over to her, and you'd give her a big hug, and you'd say, Grandma, what are you doing out here? What happened? You must be freezing. And before she'd have a chance to even explain, we would be

helping her into the car. It would be like automatic, right? All that second guessing, all those doubts, all those questions we had, right out the window. This is our grandmother. This is a real person now.

And by the way, before putting her in the car, would we stop to do a selfie? Would we brag about this on Facebook? Would we post a picture of her? #homelessgranny, look at me. It would be unthinkable to do that to her dignity. And besides, we would be too busy getting her the medical care she might need so we can get her home and make her a big bowl of her favorite soup. And after dinner, we'd make up a nice bed for her. And if it was a one-bedroom apartment, we'd be on the couch.

That's how sheep see all people. To them and to God, we're just one family, one flock. So where might we go to start as we hear this gospel and perhaps get a little motivated, a little challenged? Well, Jesus gives us five pretty specific ideas. Feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, visit the lonely. Maybe we could start by praying on those. Ask the Holy Spirit for help. Which one are you most drawn to? How are you best equipped to help one of them? What's going on in your community? What's happening in your area, or maybe through your church? And rather than a onetime thing, might we look for opportunities to make it an ongoing thing so that it becomes a habit, so it no longer interrupts our life, but becomes a part of our life?

But be mindful. We goats, we're going to be inclined to turn this into a kind of to-do item, a box to check, an obligation to satisfy, so we can get back to what we really want to do. And if you notice that inclination at first, don't panic. It's perfectly normal. Remember, we're weaning ourselves off the old carrot and stick. It's going to take some time. And if we relapse, if we start feeling resentful, if we start asking ourselves, how did I ever get talked into this? Or if we go the other route and start bragging about it to our friends and showing off on social media, it's okay. It's perfectly normal. The journey to a new consciousness doesn't happen overnight.

Perhaps we can start by noticing it when it pops up. Perhaps that little bit of self awareness. Maybe that's what we need - to know that we may need to fake it a little until we make it. Perhaps that's a good next step. After all, it seemed to work great for the disciples. They never understood what they were doing or why. They argued about it. They kept asking questions, kept misunderstanding the answers. They would pester Jesus about the pecking order, who's going to be on top. They'd fall into doubt and deny him when it mattered most. They kept following and they kept failing. But they didn't quit. And eventually, in time, the Holy Spirit took root in their heart and took over their life.

As we get ready for this season of Advent, four weeks of anticipation and waiting for the coming of Jesus, let us not forget the final lesson of this season. That

baby Jesus is already here. That little Emmanuel has already been born into the faces of the least, and the lost, and the lonely, and the left out. And He's waiting for each of us to see Him, to recognize Him, and to love Him.

Amen.