

What The King Expects From Sheep

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

Psalm 100

Matthew 25:31-46

November 20, 2011 Christ the King – Thanksgiving Sunday

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There are special moments in life when everything comes together. Duties, desires, dreams suddenly merge visibly into one time and place. I think of our wedding day, our children's baptism days- even as such a day has come this day for Eva Kathryn, Katie, Anthony, and her family. I think of high school and college graduation. Christmas, Easter, confirmation, these are high holy days when the major points of our faith, Jesus Christ's incarnation in human flesh, Jesus Christ's resurrection from the dead, our personal claiming of trust in him come together. These high peak moments offer us a sense of perspective, a renewal of hope, in the midst of life's hard and ordinary routines.

Jesus' parable of the Great Judgment offers such a moment. In his last and greatest public teaching, everything in Matthew's Gospel has been preparing for and moving toward this. Jesus tells about "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 nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates sheep from goats."ⁱ And what is it that differentiates them? It is their care for the least members of Jesus' family.

Singing the Bach B Minor Mass, with the Alabama Symphony and the Alabama Symphony Chorus, under the choral leadership of Dr. Philip Copeland this weekend, was one of those converging high point moments for me. It was a massive workout for choir and orchestra. It was a massive work for J. S. Bach himself, his most complicated and difficult work, his final summation, his finest hour well, two hours. Called "the crowning achievement of sacred music,"ⁱⁱ the B Minor Mass was so complicated, so huge that it was never performed during Bach's lifetime. It had to wait for the Alabama Symphony and Chorus! The mass is really a composite of many of Bach's cantatas and other music worked out over his whole career, woven together with altogether new choruses and arias, and all of it synthesized into a unified whole so that the various complex parts fit together.

Being a Mass, it follows the main structure of the historic Christian worship service, which provide the foundational building blocks, even as our worship service here provides the solid structure each Sunday as we move through confessional Kyrie, to exalted Gloria, through Crucifixion, to exalted Resurrection, ending in a massive Amen. To that solid structure, Bach provided vast creativity and endless variation. Musically and theologically Bach's B Minor Mass has it all and brings it all together. It is the most difficult "beast", as Philip Copeland called it, that I have ever attempted to sing.

II

Christ the King Sunday, the last day of the Christian Year, is such a converging moment. On this last day everything comes together. The day was established to emphasize the cosmic

rule and reign of Jesus Christ as King of Kings and Lord of Lords as we anticipate that day when he will come in glorious final completion of all things and judge you and me, the nations of earth, the stars of the universe, all under his rule and reign. “Every knee shall bow, every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.” On Christ the King Sunday, we proclaim that amid the chaos, Christ Jesus rules the Cosmos as King. Appropriately this year our national day of Thanksgiving follows. For what can our response be, other than giving thanks to God and being part of God’s healing, which is the message of this parable.

Matthew 25 portrays the Great Judgment before the enthroned Lord Jesus. Imagery of royal power exercised by Caesars and Kings is immense here. The camera pans back, and before the Lord seated on the glorious throne stand all the nations of the earth, everyone, all who have ever or will ever live. All of us will one day stand before our King in this way. Everything in the whole of Matthew’s Gospel points toward this, everything has been moving toward this, preparing the way for this last dramatic parable, this public declaration of Jesus before he enters into the events of his passion. Here Jesus the great teacher gives his greatest teaching, his last lecture.

We are familiar with the importance of such lectures, where one attempts to sum up the essence of what they have been about. President George Washington’s “Farewell Address” warning of foreign entanglements, President Dwight Eisenhower’s final televised address warning of the almost unstoppable U. S. military-industrial complex. Or General Douglas MacArthur’s farewell speech before a joint session of Congress after President Truman removed him from command in Korea, where he quoted, “Old soldiers never die; they just fade away.” More recently we remember how Randy Pausch gave that famous final lecture at Carnegie Mellon University before pancreatic cancer claimed his life, telling the packed hall of students to hang on to their dreams and to enable the dreams of others. Steve Jobs’ commencement address in 2005 to Stanford was another.

Many final addresses are found through the Bible. There is Jacob on his deathbed blessing his sons and pronouncing the attributes of each of the twelve tribes. There is Moses on Mt. Nebo, and really through the whole of Deuteronomy, giving his final words to the next generation. There are the last words of David reminding of God’s everlasting covenant with him and his descendants.ⁱⁱⁱ Now here is Jesus, in his last teaching,

“Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” (And) “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.”^{iv}

As Jesus is about to undertake his final steps to the cross he utters this final parable. Here he is portrayed very differently from the poor man who wandered from place to place throughout Galilee with no where to call home. Here he is portrayed as he really is, and finally will be, the great victorious King seated upon his throne, ruling, reigning. This parable follows parables which sought to give explanation about why the second coming of the Lord is delayed, and the need for readiness as we wait. Servants who are to maintain the master’s household faithfully until he returns, bridesmaids who need to have oil in their lamps, three servants who are

entrusted with the master's vast resources, two invest wisely and one does not. In all these parables the master is away, his coming delayed, and we observe behaviors in his absences.

Now the master returns, the final day has come. History is complete. The Son of man comes in great glory with battalions of angels. This is a scene from the heavenly throne room, now descended to earth. Life is over and judgment of all has come. The Son of man is in the business of separating, sorting the just from the unjust, the saved from the damned. The sheep from the goats, and the basis upon which the separation is made, is how people have treated the least and the lost - the poor, the hungry, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned.

“Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”^v

Those who responded compassionately toward these needy are welcomed as sheep. Welcomed not because of their good works, but doing good works, reaching out, offering help because their faith has given them eyes to see, ears to hear, hearts to love and wills to serve. Those who do not extend themselves are deemed goats and cast into eternal fire.

Perhaps most amazing is the response of the sheep to the words of the Son in his glory, “When, Lord, did we do these things to you as we provided these kindnesses? When did we see you?” And the Son replies, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family you did it to me.”^{vi}

Notice who Jesus includes in his family. Not simply washed and scrubbed and cleaned church people, but poor hungry thirsty sick prisoners, aliens, strangers, these needy outcasts are among those Jesus counts as his people. He says what you did to these whom the world and the State of Alabama count unimportant, invisible, foreign, you did to me. These are my people, my family. Here is powerful instruction about what we, his church, are to be about in these in-between times, as we await this final scene. Here is what Jesus expects from this sheep.

III

It is often said that our faith involves both belief and actions, both creeds and deeds. What I want to say today, out of Jesus' final teaching, is this; the Church that Worships Together – Serves Together. No if's, ands or buts, or exceptions, Worship and Mission belong together. No saying, I will worship, you will serve. I will build houses and feed the hungry, you will sing hymns and offer prayers. Our faith is necessarily both and one leads to the other. If you think of it, God expects quite a lot out of a bunch of sheep. He invests a lot in us. And to whom much is given – much is expected.

Sheep and goats are images of simple animals, common to Palestine of Jesus' day. Goats get the rap in this parable. They are the bad guys. But then sheep too are not considered the sharpest animals in the neighborhood. They are clumsy, near-sighted, eat whatever is in front of them, dumb. Yet they are deemed worthy.

Sheep are ordinary and we are ordinary. But here is the wonder, we ordinary people, we good shepherds and good sheep, the metaphors mix and yet we are extraordinary in God's sight. We are blessed – as we bless. We receive – as we give.

What I want you to grasp here, in this last lecture of Jesus, is the balance and rhythm between worship and service. A scene of exalted worship and intentional outreach. The Son of Man comes in glory. “The head that once was crowned with thorns is crowned with glory now.” Jesus, who lived among us, taught, healed, then died on a cross, was raised from the dead, ascended into heaven, and from there now rules and reigns as King. He is worthy of all worship. He demands all worship. As we seek to grow in faith we will continually be people who gather for worship. Worship is the source of our inspiration.

But then we do not stop here. We depart to serve. Inspiration leads to perspiration. The Church that Worships Together – Serves together. “You are entering the mission field.” Every time you leave this place. The end of our worship is more meaningful service. Because God loves us, we worship. Because God loves us we serve. We reach out to the needy who come across our radar. We cannot fix it all, but we can fix something and someone.

IV

What does the King expect of sheep? What does the Lord expect of his people? He expects us ordinary people to undertake extraordinary actions, “With deeds of love and mercy, the heavenly kingdom comes.” Democracy makes this possible, right? Deeds once reserved for royalty are open to all the sheep now. A thousand points of light. Often small deeds of kindness, little things, but one heaped on another. The King expects us to be those who are helping to make right what is wrong in the world.

I see many among this congregation who are doing this, making a difference for good. And many more of you are doing it than I or anyone knows. Let me chase one of you up into the clearing.

I recently was with Jeff Windham, one of our members. Jeff is a gifted young attorney in our congregation. I had the privilege of performing Jeff and Kim's wedding and then baptizing their son Conner. But I never knew about Jeff's quiet steady work with Brother Bryan Rescue Mission downtown until after the funeral one afternoon for Sarah McMichael. She was one of our oldest members. For many years Sarah was director of the Brother Bryan Mission. But that was a long time ago.

After the funeral the new mission director introduced himself to me and said, “Jeff is on our board.” Long story short, Jeff and I got together for lunch shortly after that, then toured the Mission, founded by the famed Birmingham Pastor Brother Bryan, (from whose Third

Presbyterian Church, by the way, South Highland's charter members came.) It is an impressive clean, well-managed Christian mission in which the spiritual condition and spiritual growth of the men is central. I learned that Jeff not only serves on the board, but goes every Thursday night for two or three hours and gives his time as an attorney doing pro-bono legal work for these homeless men. He has helped many of them through difficult legal problems. He has made a difference.

I do not mean to put the spotlight on Jeff. He would not want that. But he is simply one fine example of the many acts of quiet care and compassion hundreds of you are offering. And maybe his example will be a spark for someone here who needs to take a step forward to reach out and serve someone somewhere. We South Highlanders are making a difference. Our faith is flowing out in deeds, "deeds of love and mercy," and God's kingdom is growing. But we can do more! For beware, the church that ignores need, ignores Jesus, and falls under judgment.

David Seamans describes a conversation he overheard between a young man and his coach as they were preparing for the state track meet. The event was the high jump. The young man was most diligent and dedicated in his training, and the coach continued to push him to excel. He kept raising the bar higher and higher. Then he put the bar at the record height. If the young man cleared that height in the meet then he'd win the state record. The boy said, "Coach, how do you think I can ever jump that high?" And the coach replied, "Son, just throw your heart over first and the rest of you will follow."

That is what I am asking you to do today. "Throw your heart over, and the rest of you will follow."

Let me pull all this together by referring you back to Bach and his B Minor Mass, his final lecture, his final summary statement of this musical genius. Robert Shaw, the famed Atlanta conductor of the Robert Shaw Chorale writes in an essay,

"The greatest forces toward unity are those attributes of inspiration and technique of which the artist is most unselfconscious during creativity. Bach was a whole man and his work shows a wholeness which no musicologist wants to deny; As the text of the Mass provided a common source for its large episodes, so did Bach's unwavering religious conviction and his staggering musical craftsmanship provide inevitable unity."

Friends, we all want our lives to be whole, complete, unified. To do that, obey the teachings of Jesus Christ. Worship and Serve, exuberantly, authentically, unselfconsciously. Give yourself to God. Give yourself to others, even the least of these, and you will find all you are looking for. You will find yourself. You will find God. You will be welcomed into God's kingdom, right here, right now, and for all eternity.

Amen.

ⁱ Matthew 25:31-32

ⁱⁱ So stated by Alfred Mann

ⁱⁱⁱ 2 Samuel 23:1-7

^{iv} Matthew 25: 40

^v Matthew 25: 34-36

^{vi} Matthew 25:40