



“On Being Sheep: Justice and Healing”

Texts: Ezekiel 34:11-16, Matthew 25:31-46

a sermon by the Rev. Anna von Winckler

**Christ the King Sunday
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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

Greetings! It is good to be back with you. I had a great time in Japan. Before I left, people were telling me to not think about anything regarding the church, to just relax and enjoy my time with my son. And I did just that.

It's been seven weeks since I've stood up here before you. This time of separation was good for me. It refreshed my soul. Was it good for you? I've heard about the great messages you heard from Andy Hubbard, Steve Wylie, and of course Jerusha. It is always good to hear other voices and perspectives.

This passage from Matthew is on separation. It is Christ the King Sunday and this passage is talking about when Christ comes and sees what we've each been doing with the lives that we have been given. At face value, this passage seems quite cut and dry. Those who help others are good sheep and destined for eternal life with Christ, the King. Likewise, those who do not help others are destined to a life of eternal fire. But I read an interesting article this week that looks at this passage from a bit of a different perspective. And I'd like to share that with you this morning. It looked at this passage with the idea that separation is not necessarily a bad thing.

Separation - the good from the bad, the righteous from the unrighteous, the faithful from the unfaithful. That's how we read this passage and that is too often how we view life, even if we don't consciously think about it. We separate ourselves from those who look, act, believe, live, and do differently from us. We may enter into their world for a moment, working at a soup kitchen or helping to build a Habitat Home, but we don't really want to enter into their reality. It is too uncomfortable there and we like our comforts. And so, on some level, we label others, drug addicts are bad, the alcoholic is weak, the Christian Nationalist has a distorted view of Christianity. And we, we are good. We don't do drugs, we aren't alcoholics, we understand and live out Christ's command to love. We see this separation in all aspects of life these days - politics, race,

immigration, the economy and the list goes on. And, it is happening with us in our day to day lives. We may not recognize it, but it happens. The fleeting thoughts of judgment that we have when we see someone and deem them as different than us, lesser than. If we stopped to analyze our thoughts throughout the day, I'm sure you'd be surprised how often those quick thoughts of judgment spring up.

Yet Jesus said, "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." and "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." What do we do with those verses in light of today's gospel lesson?

And so I go back to the idea that separation isn't always bad. Maybe the separation Jesus makes doesn't look a thing like the separation that we usually make.

So, I propose this to you. What if, for Jesus, separation is not the same as exclusion? What if badness is not an obstacle to being in the kingdom of God but neither is goodness a prerequisite? (Capon, Kingdom, Grace, Judgment, 507) After all, both groups in today's gospel ask Jesus the same question, "Lord, when did we see you?" Neither had a clue about what they were doing, they were just in different stages of their journey, different ways of living out their lives. And what if separation is needed? Not forever, but for a time?

From the time we are born, we are learning how to separate and make separations. I remember when my son turned one and it seemed like a light bulb went off in his head. While he still couldn't talk, he learned that he could make a sound of protest that was clearly understood by the rest of the family. He was beginning to assert himself as his own person.

Likewise, a professor at Princeton told the story of when his daughter was two and he was out walking with her. At one point he told her it was time to turn around and go home. She said very clearly, "No!" She turned around and walked with her father willingly, but with each step she would say, "No!" These little ones were learning individuality and taking on the new life that God had given them.

And then we went through it as teens and with our teen children. Arguments, struggles, the challenging of parental authority, it was all the ways teens use to discover their place in the world. These separations keep coming as we leave our parents for college and then work and marriage. And it all is about growth and creating a new life and a new way of being. And all these struggles, these separations are not about being wrong or bad, but a sign that separating, growing up, and claiming the fullness of our life is hard and often painful work, at any age and every age. It never ends, for it is an ongoing process of seeking to create and discover for ourselves life and more life.

Separation for the right reason brings life. And what if that's exactly what Jesus is doing in today's gospel? Separating in order to bring about a new creation, a new life, a new way of being, in you and me? It's not about sheep OR goats, but about sheep AND goats.

No one is all sheep or all goat. Who here has ever given food, water, or clothes to someone in need, visited someone in the hospital or jail, welcomed a newcomer, a stranger? Raise your hands if you have. You are a sheep. And who here has driven past the guy on the corner holding a sign saying, "Homeless and hungry", or declined to take the time to visit someone at the hospital or to volunteer at the soup kitchen because you'd rather have the day to play and do your own thing? Raise your hand. You are a goat. I've done both and it looks like you have too. So are we sheep or goats? Yes and yes. We are both. There are parts that are sheep-like and other parts that are goat-like.

I wanted to talk about this today, because I've been thinking about churches that preach absolutism. You are either a goat or a sheep. You either believe this or you are not a Christian. Some churches and denominations have such a strict way of believing that no one would be able to live up to their standard; and in most cases even the minister doesn't come close to the ideal they put upon the believers. And that does so much harm as people question whether they are worthy, whether they are good enough, whether God could possibly love them. In reality, we are both sheep and goats, but that doesn't mean that God doesn't push us to become more sheep-like. Just as we separate our little ones, giving them a time out when they do something wrong, doesn't mean we don't love them or no longer want them to be part of our family. It just means we want them to think about what they did so that they don't make the same mistake again. We want them to grow to be kind and thoughtful and generous people. It's the same for us and God.

Often we can see the goat-like parts in other people but it is hard to see it in ourselves. We don't want to see it in ourselves because it is painful to see how less than perfect we are. I'd rather not have to face the part of me that is wounded, fearful, hurting, angry, resentful, that makes me goat-like. But it is when I look at those parts of me that I can grow, heal, and be transformed. Or to put it in the imagery that Jesus uses, there are parts of myself that are in need of the "eternal fire."

The article I read this week talked about eternal as not being about the length of time, but about it being a quality of God, a way of being. So when we speak of eternal life, we're speaking about the divine life. And when we speak of eternal fire, we're speaking about the divine fire. The author goes on to say that both eternal life and eternal fire are God's. It's not as if eternal life with God and eternal fire is apart from God. One is not an entrance to the kingdom and the other an exclusion from the kingdom. Both are within and aspects of the kingdom of God.

There are many scripture passages that talk about the refining fire. In Psalm 66:10-12 it says:

For You, O God, have tested us; You have refined us as silver is refined. You brought us into the net; You laid affliction on our backs. You have caused men to ride over our heads; We went through fire and through water; But You brought us out to rich fulfillment.

This eternal fire, the refining fire, lets us see ourselves and others in a new light - in the light of compassion, mercy, justice, forgiveness, love. It is a purifying fire, burning the dross of our life and revealing the gold that is already and always has been within us. The eternal fire is neither destructive nor exclusionary, but transformative and creative.

If you've come here this morning still held by teachings from the past that say you have to be a certain way or believe a certain way, then let go of that. We will all be goat-like to the day we die, but that doesn't mean that we can't become more sheep-like as we grow throughout our lives.

I may have told you this story before, but I know a couple who lost their oldest son to gun violence when he was just 26. A wonderful young man who just happened to be at the right place at the wrong time. The mother was destroying herself emotionally because she didn't know if her son had ever made a profession of faith. He had been questioning faith and God before his death: Is there a God? Who is this God? Who am I in relation to this God? Am I good enough for this God? Do I really believe in God? Questions that are all too common for not only young adults but for all of us at times, but that doesn't mean that God doesn't still love and accept us. It doesn't mean that if I don't say those words, "I accept Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior" that I am not bound for heaven regardless of how I live out the rest of my life.

We are wonderful, loving sheep and we are selfish, greedy goats. We will be refined by fire - sometimes that fire will be caused by our own selfish choices, sometimes by others' bad choices, and sometimes, and I do believe this, by God's hand. But when we find ourselves in the heat of that refining fire, while it may be hard to praise God, we need to look at what God wants us to learn, what we need to change, let go of, and what we need to embrace more of. We need to give ourselves grace when we are goats, but never stop striving to become more sheep like. It takes a lifetime and even then we won't be made into perfection until that moment when we leave this earth and enter into God's presence. Do not turn your back on your goat like parts, but look at them so that you can become more of the child of God that Christ desires for you. And always, show yourself some grace, because God always does. Amen.



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