

SERMON
November 22, 2020, Christ the King Sunday

Table-Talking

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We come to the end of the liturgical year, otherwise known as a calendar for the Christian church. It is a calendar that chronicles the life of Jesus and we are about to start the new year with Advent, that season in which we look forward to the birth of the Christ child.

As we close out the 2020 liturgical year today we celebrating that, our Lord, from child to adult, continues to reign as the king who came and lived, died and rose again as a ruler of love and mercy and justice. He came as one who builds up the kingdom, not for the sake of self, but to the glory of God.

Throughout his ministry, but particularly in the last days of his life, Jesus prepares the disciples for his good-bye and for his hello again. As he gathered with them at the table, preparing them for the day of death, he is quick to follow up with the instructions that they are not given permission to sit around, doing nothing until he returned. But as for a coming back time, even he, the son of God, did not know. In essence Jesus tells them, it is fine to sit at table together and remember, but for goodness sakes do not sit on all that God has given. Be good stewards of our blessings for the sake of growing God's kingdom! And that, he says, calls for action.

And today we find ourselves with Jesus instructing the disciples, and us, on yet another way we can live in his absence even as we are preparing for his return. And in a word, what he has to say is discomfoting. But Jesus is a master at teaching us that our discomfort, has a valuable lesson. It is when we are uncomfortable, Jesus preaches, that we are most often reminded that balance and harmony are needed to gather around the table here on this earth and eventually at the great heavenly feast.

According to Jesus, sitting with others requires that we not judge one another or exclude people because they are sinners, whether it be that kind of sin or this kind of sin. Sin is sin and we are all sinners, and sinners meeting and eating together always makes a great place to express and experience God's grace.

At the Table of the Lord, we are continually reminded that, in spite of our sheep or goat tendencies, we can come with a deep trust in God's goodness and grace, the kind of trust that calls us to freely share with others.

The judging part of this parable is less about who we are, and more about who God is, and in our knowing that, what we do with our trust. On the side of God's grace in judging, Jesus shares this: we choose whether we go to the left or to the right, but no matter which path we choose, God loves us unconditionally. But, because of our freedom in choosing, the consequences of our choices rest squarely on our shoulders, even if we choose to do nothing!

And nothing was the choice of the goats. This parable is summed up in one of the great confessions we sometimes pray: Lord, forgive us for the things we have done and the things we have left undone! Jesus does not say the goats are greater sinners than the sheep; the sheep are sinners too. The dividing line comes when the goats see the exact same thing as the sheep and freely choose to do nothing to help the sufferings of their brothers and sisters.

What I love about this parable is that it is told as only Jesus can tell. Jesus is ever aware of giving glory to God. Here in this high drama with nations and angels and the Son of Man sitting on a throne preparing to enter the world again in splendor, we are sit on the edge of our seats waiting for the grand and glorious heavenly finale, and what does Jesus do? He draws our eyes not upward, but downward, back to our reality, to our heaven on earth and says to us: take care of one another, sit at the table with all the other sinners, the sheep and goats. It is there that my grace sits with you, between you, within you, among you!

Jesus is truly a "down to earth" person. Even in his growing years of observing the traditions and practices of his faith, he never took his eyes off of people in need, people who were suffering, people who were lost in their spiritual, or mental, physical or emotional needs.

It is not wrong to read this parable the way Jesus' readers would have heard it, that the nations were in essence Gentiles, and judgment would fall upon them according to how they welcomed, or not welcomed, the new Christians who came to share a good word about God's grace in Jesus. We

could read this parable as if it were the least who most needed to hear the Good News, and they did. But, if we believe that God's table is wide and long, never lacking a place to sit, then this parable is about all of God's children. All of God's children are met with compassion and grace and generosity at the table. Extravagant hospitality, Jesus' way. This parable is about more than a personal commitment to choosing to do as Jesus did; this is a communal call to Jesus-sized hospitality, whether we are talking our church, our city, or our world. The conversation at any table around which we gather should have at its core, the grace of God as we know in Jesus Christ. It is God's grace that reminds us as we sit together, we are not meant to be self-sufficient. This reminds me of one of my favorite quotes:

While we do our good works let us not forget that the real solution lies in a world in which charity will have become unnecessary.

Tom Long's commentary on this passage says we are challenged, "not to define ourselves as religious or spiritual because we go to church and pray and occasionally make a contribution to a worthy cause or volunteer some of our time to help others. The words of Jesus illustrate true religion that transforms our lives, opening our eyes to encounter the sacred in our everyday lives, including the sacred within our brothers and sisters. Is not it sometimes easier to build beautiful houses of worship, to sing glorious hymns, or even to appreciate the beauty of nature, than it is to see the image of God in one another?"

In other words, too often we see sheep and we see goats, and what we should be seeing in each other, is the face of Christ, even if we have to look a little longer and deeper with some than others.

Just about the time we want to huddle up with the sheep, we realize that the sheep and the goats are all most likely good people, the sheep just a bit more attuned to the needs of others. But even the sheep miss the heart of Jesus' message. What we do for others is not a measuring stick of who will gather or not gather at the heavenly table. What we do for others is just what we do. Why? It is our thank you to God for all that we cannot do for and by ourselves, especially save ourselves, for that is only by the grace of God!

Whether we are sheep or whether we are goats, the greatest tragedy is not seeing the face of Christ in one another. As Barbara Brown Taylor says, just about the time we try to make law out of Jesus' words, commanding you to the left and you to the right, Jesus says, "Let us talk gospel. Talk good news. Talk grace. I love you sheep and goat and all in between, but only you can walk the path that will put you at the table-here and in eternity!"

Taylor goes on to say: God will tell us that what matters is how we behaved when we thought God was not around, not just in church, but in everyday encounters with others, with all children of God. Jesus preaches and teaches that we are called into relationship even when that relationship is unlikely, momentary, or even sad. We are called to look at each other and see Christ. It is as simple, and as hard, as that.

So bound together as a community of faith, may we find strength as we lean on the grace of God to help us not only see, but seek the Christ in each of us, in all of our table-talking, at this table and at all the tables around which we gather. Amen