

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

Christ the King • November 26, 2017

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24 • Psalm 95:1-7 • Ephesians 1:15-23 • Matthew 25:31-46

It's bound to happen sooner or later. Maybe at a Bible study. Maybe in worship. Maybe on your own time. But eventually, when you read scripture, you'll come across something difficult. An idea about God that feels hard to square with what you believe. Or an idea about God that feels out of date with the way the world works. Or a place where scripture seems to disagree with itself. So when that happens, what do we do? What do we do with it? One option, the easiest option, is to ignore it. Just pretend it isn't there. Another option is to just accept it. If it's in the Bible it must be true. In the Lutheran tradition, we have another way. A third way of dealing with difficult texts. Which is that you let scripture interpret scripture. When you find a piece of scripture that you find difficult or problematic or confusing. Read it in conversation with another piece of scripture where the gospel clearly shines through.

We don't do tests in confirmation or bible studies here, but if we did, and the question was "How do we interpret scripture?" and you wrote down "Scripture interprets scripture," you would get a big A+. Gold star. Put it on the fridge.

When you read through the history of the church, the ways people have read the Bible, you see that the idea that scripture interprets scripture is fairly popular. Pretty much everybody does it. Even people who don't use the phrase do it. But when you get to that other question, what's the second piece of scripture that we're holding it up against, there's a lot of diversity. Which is basically a nice way of saying its complete chaos. Because now instead of having an argument about what a piece of scripture means, you now have a different argument about which scripture to interpret it with. Like Jesus multiplying the loaves and fishes, we were given one problem and we turned it into two.

So what are some of the texts or ideas that we could interpret scripture with? Last month, we talked about Luther's Reformation Discovery, about this little line from the beginning of the book of Romans about God's grace. And for Luther, the statement that faith is a gift is the lens you read scripture through. That's a good answer. In the twentieth century, when Christians start engaging with people of other faiths, they come back to these passages where St. Paul writes about how everyone is included in the embrace of God. That's a good answer. But St. Augustine, who we talked about a little bit this fall in our adult ed stuff, who is the most important thinker in the first thousand years of the church, he kept coming back to today's gospel reading. Which is not a great answer. But he read today's gospel reading about the sheep and the goats and he thought, "Well, you got sheep. And you got goats. Pretty clear to me."

If that image, Jesus separating the sheep from the goats, if that is the scripture that interprets scripture, if that is the image of Jesus that you read scripture through, you will end up not only with a very particular view of scripture, a view of scripture as a series of demands and condemnations. But also with a picture of a very angry God. A wrathful God. A vindictive God. God keeping track of exactly how many times you did feed the hungry or clothe the naked or visit the imprisoned. And exactly how needy those people were. When Jesus comes back, you'll be judged. Be ready to make your case.

We mainline Protestants are not big fans of the image of God the judge. God the judge is a bit much. But we have our own kind of well-scrubbed version that we love: God the scorekeeper. The God who keeps track of merits and demerits. Rack up as many points as you can. Volunteer at a walk-in dinner? Plus fifty points. Clothe a refugee? Plus eighty. Take off your shoes on an airplane? Don't ask. We Lutherans talk a lot about grace, but we run this kind of math in our heads

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constantly. Because that image of God the scorekeeper makes us feel good. It makes us feel like we're making progress or getting ahead or accomplishing something.

But this little mental accounting is something we do at our own peril. Back in the late 1990s, Peter Singer, who's an ethicist at Princeton, wrote an essay for the New York Times Magazine called "The Peter Singer Solution to World Poverty." And the basic argument is that we are very good about addressing needs when they present themselves to us immediately. Face-to-face, person-to-person. But that we're really bad at addressing needs that don't present themselves so clearly. Of addressing the needs of people we don't live around, run into, or listen to. We're more than happy to skip a few dinners out or cut a vacation short to help a friend who needs help with bills. But we rarely do the same to help people halfway around the globe who need our help just as urgently. So for every good deed we score in our heads, there are a whole bunch of good deeds that we fail to do.

So if you want to make a claim that you're someone doing everything you can to make the world a better place, one of the proverbial sheep in today's story, Singer suggests that after you cover the cost of your basic necessities, everything else should go to international aid. No vacations. No HBO. No sauvignon blancs. Median household income in Wyckoff is somewhere around \$140,000 a year. So he's talking about sixty thousand dollars a year minimum. If that strikes you as absurd, an impossibly high standard to meet bordering on being grossly irresponsible, and you are wondering if this Peter Singer character even follows his own advice thank you very much, then it's having its intended effect.

We often view ourselves by our best intentions. When we try to turn life into a game where God keeps score of how much good we've done, we're really just setting it up to view whatever we've done in the best possible light. We are great at keeping track of the good that we do, but we don't really keep track of the good that we don't do.

Singer isn't coming at this from the Christian tradition, but the problem he's talking about is something we have language to talk about. That's why every week when we confess our sin we don't just confess the things we did that we shouldn't have done but we also confess the things we should have done but didn't. Things we didn't do either because we didn't care or because it was too difficult or even, this is the one we struggle with, because we just didn't know. "In your compassion," the liturgy reads, "forgive us our sins, known and unknown, things we have done and things we have failed to do." The hungry we have failed to feed. The naked we have failed to clothe. The strangers we have failed to welcome. If you worship God the scorekeeper, if that's the way you read scripture and view life, then eventually you're going to realize that you've been grading yourself on a curve.

So instead of making Jesus the judge the norm that defines everything else, let's let scripture interpret scripture or, in this case, let's let Jesus interpret Jesus. Because Jesus shows up twice in this reading. Once Jesus shows up as a judge. The one who separates the sheep from the goats. But the other place Jesus shows up is among those on the margins. Among the people who have been forgotten or left out.

It's funny in this story that the two groups, the proverbial sheep and goats, both say the same thing. When Jesus comments on their actions, they both say, "When was it that we saw you hungry, a stranger, naked, or sick?" They both scratch their heads and say, "Huh? I don't remember that at all. I remember the sick and the hungry and I remember the strangers, but I don't remember you at all."

The difference isn't in whether they recognize Jesus. Nobody recognized Jesus. It's what their response is. The goats try to make it about themselves. They say, "Well of course I would have given them something to eat or something to drink or welcomed them if I had known it was you."

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Could you imagine how many points that would have gotten me?” When they hear Jesus’s presence among the people on the margins, they hear it as a command. As a missed opportunity. As a way they could have bolstered themselves up if only Jesus had been a little more clear.

But the sheep, the ones who hear Jesus’s promise hear something else. When they hear about Jesus being at the margins, they are surprised. Not angry, but bewildered. What they care about isn’t themselves. It isn’t what credit they do or don’t get. It’s that they are so intent on serving the needs of others that they don’t even realize who they are serving. They don’t even realize the good they’re doing.

Every week we confess sins that we didn’t know we committed. But whenever we do that, we should also be thinking about the good we do that is totally unknown to us. Jesus promises that in the same way that we are so often ignorant of our sins, we are just as often, if not more so, ignorant of the good that we do do. That there are times when we welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, feed the hungry, and we don’t even realize it. Times when Jesus says you welcomed me, fed me, clothed me, and we say, “I’ll take your word for it.”

The sheep and goats aren’t two distinct groups of people so much as they are two ways of understanding our relationship with God and with the world. One way, the way of the goats, is focused solely on running up the score. They don’t see Jesus in the faces of the people they serve because they are so busy looking over their shoulders to see who is watching them. But, Jesus says, that’s not the only thing that’s true about you. Jesus says that if you stop trying to keep score, stop trying to ask what the people you serve have to offer you, that you will start to see your life the way God sees it. That God’s mercy will be so abundant in your life that sometimes you won’t even notice it. Because even when we think like goats, God is still calling us sheep. Just like we’re all sinners that God is calling saints.

Today, the final day of the church year, this is worth considering. What would it mean to make this gospel reading the center of our life together? To make this Jesus the Jesus that interprets our life together? To see God not as a judge or a scorekeeper but to see God as God comes to us in Jesus: hungry, lonely, naked, imprisoned. To center our life together on the margins, where Jesus is promising to meet us. To believe God when God calls us sheep, even when some days we feel more like goats. To let this be the story that interprets our lives. That even when we feel inadequate, like the world’s needs are bigger than we can meet, Jesus is still inviting us into eternal life.

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