

SLD11.20.11 Christ the King Sunday, Thanksgiving
Emory Presbyterian Church
Matthew 25: 31-46
Jill Oglesby Evans

“Now Thank We All Our God”

So this'll be the third time I've preached on this text here at Emory Church. The first time was in 2000, then again in 2008, and now again in 2011. That's the way lectionary does, at least with the gospels: repeat itself every three years.

Only, as an intentional interim pastor for 15 years, I hardly ever faced the challenge of preaching the same text in the same church more than once, never mind *three* times. That's a long-term pastor sort of issue, like officiating at the wedding of someone you've baptized. (Me, I'm still holding out for Hayden.)

In any case, when I confronted the resurgence of this rather long, rather repetitive and inescapably convicting passage, I wondered whether I'd really have anything new to say about it. Not that anybody remembers my sermons, least of all me. But now that they're available on our website, Debbie'll bust me if I preach the same thing twice.

But besides that, since we Presbyterians regard scripture not merely as immutable and sacred black and white words on a page but as God's *living* Word, any absence of fresh witness to a text is not an issue of the Word, but of the preacher. Unfortunately, *this* preacher not only has little experience preaching multiple times on the same text, she doesn't even particularly *like* this text.

Not that it doesn't make a good point – what we do for the “least of these,” we do for Jesus – but after this long stretch of damning parables: the parable of the Wedding Banquet, the parable of the Two Sons, the parable of the Ten Bridesmaids, the parable

of the Talents, and now, on this final Sunday of the lectionary year, this expose on the final judgment – a body can get weary of being told so often how we don't measure up. I mean, we've had *weeks* of an angry, impatient, anxiety-provoking Jesus who, as he approaches his own death, keeps raising the stakes of faithful understanding and action...and letting us know how we don't meet them.

Plus, it's not going to get better any time soon. Next week is first Advent, which launches a new lectionary year with the shock and awe, as you may remember, of the Apocalypse.

These days it's as if lectionary, like a pregnant woman in her last weeks, wants to get us good and bloated and miserable before God breaks in and gets born again, just so, I guess, despite the pain and suffering of the delivery, it all feel SO good once the baby is finally delivered.

I mean, you think the Second Coming is hard to wait for; ask Adrianna or Amy, about waddling through the endtimes of a full term pregnancy.

Anyway, so here we arrive at yet another long, repetitive, annoyingly dualistic, and ultimately damning diatribe from Jesus. Reckon we've got it by now? On the face of it, before God?, we're not much.

You may recall the story about a room full of elderly nuns hearing a presentation about this passage (especially since I've told it three times! ☹.) The fellow asks them, "how many of you, even once in your life, have done what Jesus says to do, and fed a hungry person, given clothes to the naked, or visited an inmate?" All the sisters raise their hands.

"That's great!" he says. "You're all sheep!" And the nuns look pretty pleased with themselves.

Then he asks, “So how many of you, even once in your life, have you ever walked by a hungry person and *not* fed them, or *failed* to clothe someone who was naked, or *not* visited someone who was in prison?”

One by one, the nuns slowly raise their hands again.

“I’m sorry,” says the presenter. “You’re all goats.” Upon which this roomful of Mother Teresas looks a little disappointed. Until one very old sister’s hand shoots up and she blurts out – “I get it! We’re all good goats!”¹

And that’s right. She *does* get it. For all their discipline and faith and good works and love of Christ, before God, not even one of those life-worn, time-taught saintly sisters qualifies as a kingdom-inheriting sheep. Shoot, not even *Jesus* fed and clothed and healed *everybody* he came across. Bottom line, “good goats” is as good as we can get. And goats, good, bad or otherwise, according to today’s harangue, are irrevocably damned to the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

Bummer.

But you know, every time I come across one of these damning diatribes from Jesus, especially when they’re aimed not at the scribes or Pharisees but his own disciples, I remind myself that these tirades are never Jesus’ *final* word to his disciples. They represent an important word, a serious word; the messiah *means* what he says: in the end you got your good guys, who aren’t all that good, and your bad guys, who, if you dig a little deeper, don’t end up being all *that* bad, and if there weren’t such a thing as grace, why, nobody’d end up enjoying eternal life.

Sort of like that little Calvinistic ditty I’ve also shared three times:

¹ Linn, Dennis and Sheila Fabricant and Matthew, Good Goats, Healing Our Image Of God. Paulist Press, 1993, p. 49.

There's so much good in the worst of us
and so much bad in the best of us
that it hardly becomes any of us
to talk about the rest of us. (repeat)

So today's text, while convicting, does not represent Jesus' *final* word to his disciples. Today we're not at Jesus' *final* word; we're just at a very important word along the way. But when the baby finally comes...well, as we all know...regardless of all our planning and preparation, *everything* changes. In fact, when the baby comes, everything we secretly thought was so important to get done before the event actually becomes quite irrelevant before the power and intention of Life demanding to renew itself, to make its debut, to change the world.

Only, unlike Adrianna and Amy, we're not there yet. It's coming. Lectionary promises the Christ child is coming. But meanwhile her pressure's up, her ankles are swollen, and she's in a bad mood.

"You, over there. Goat. Get outta my face."

It's an important word. When it comes to the demands of discipleship, it's a *serious* word. But hardly Jesus' *final* word to his disciples. Because we all know, right? that Jesus' *final* word to his disciples is always "Grace." "Forgiveness." "Healing." "Wholeness." Coming home to the heart of God.

Only we're not there yet. Nor is Jesus in this part of his story. In this part of his story, shortly before his death, it sounds awfully like what he's trying to get across to his disciples is that if we're looking where to find him after he's gone from this earth, we need look no further than our own hearts and hands.

I wonder if any of you have heard of Jacob Needleman. Needleman is a professor of religion and philosophy at San Francisco State University and a much

published author on both topics. He's been around a long time. Even back when I lived in San Francisco in the late 70's, he was already a part of the Bay Area intellectual landscape as a trustworthy, inquiring, articulate and wise presence.

Now, Needleman is not a Christian; at least in any conventional sense. He was born Jewish in Philadelphia, subsequently studied many religious traditions at Harvard and Yale, eventually encountering the teachings of the Russian mystic, Gurdjieff, which remain a touchstone of his perspective.²

Now, I have only the most passing of acquaintances with Gurdjieff – he'd be a fascinating one to study sometime – but about him Needleman remarks that, “He understood, as many great teachers have, that humanity is in a bad way. He (Gurdjieff) called it “sleep,” (sound familiar?). Using such words as “consciousness” and “being” rather than religious or metaphysical language, Gurdjieff taught that “we live in illusion, losing all contact with reality, both in the world and within ourselves.”

So he (Gurdjieff) had many ways of confronting people with their illusion about themselves. (remind you of anybody?) saying, “I wish to create around myself conditions in which a (person) would be continually reminded of the sense and aim of his existence, *by an unavoidable friction between his conscience and the automatic manifestations of his nature.*” (The Sun p.10)

That's what I see Jesus as forever doing, and certainly in today's text and recent parables: creating around himself conditions in which his disciples would be continually reminded of the sense and aim of their existence, though pointing out the *unavoidable friction* between how we behave and how he wants us to behave. Now, why would that

² “Beyond Belief, Jacob Needleman On God Without Religion,” D. Patrick Miller., The Sun, Issue 432, December 2011, Chapel Hill, N.C. p. 5.

be important? Why would it be important for Jesus to keep poking and jabbing at the consciousness of those who want to follow him?

In his book *What is God?*, Needleman speaks writes of ...opening ourselves up to the *living experience of God – not God as a judgmental deity watching us from a throne in the sky, but God as us*. Listen to this: he says, “It is only in and through people, inwardly developed men and women, that God can exist and act in the world of humanity on earth. Bluntly speaking,” he says, “the proof for the existence of God is the existence of people who are inhabited by and who manifest God.... God needs not just (humanity,) but *awakened* (humanity), in order to act as God in the human world. Without this conscious energy on the earth it may not be possible for divine justice, mercy, or compassion to enter the lives of human beings.”

He goes on: “It is only in and through people, inwardly developed men and women, (we would say “men and women of mature faith”) that God can exist and act in the world of humanity on earth.

Now, I’m not quite so confident as Needleman about proclaiming what God can and cannot do in the world of humanity on earth, but I do think his view echoes the profoundly incarnational theology with which Jesus confronts us in today’s text. “Incarnational” means “in the carne.” Who knows what “carne” means in Spanish or Portuguese or Latin? Meat. It means “meat.” So “incarnational theology” is theology in the *meat*, in the *flesh*, in *our* flesh. Incarnational theology is God enfleshed, in Jesus, in you, and in me.

When was it that we saw you a stranger, Jesus, and welcomed you, or naked, and gave you clothing? And when was it we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?

Whenever you did it to the least of these, says Jesus, you do it to me. That's incarnational theology.

And it ain't automatic. It ain't automatic for us to welcome the stranger or feed the hungry or take care of the sick. It ain't automatic for us to cook turkeys for the Open Door or show up at the Clifton Night Shelter or remember to change the world with our coins. Frankly, feeding the hungry or welcoming the stranger or caring for the sick can sometimes be scary or gross or expensive or, at best, inconvenient. But for weeks now, including in today's text, Jesus keeps raising the stakes *to wake up* his disciples to *ourselves!* Confronting us with our illusions, creating conditions to remind us of the sense and purpose of our existence, pointing out the unavoidable friction between the goats we are and the sheep he calls us to be. Driving home before he dies the demands of *incarnational* theology so that, though men and women of mature faith, God can exist and act in the world of humanity on earth.

Today we come to the end of the lectionary year. We've completed the whole cycle. Jesus is all grown up now. In fact, he's already died, resurrected, been crowned King, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty. And from where he sitteth, what he wants to see as he looks out over creation, is *himself*, incarnated, enfleshed, in you, in me, in the ones we serve. Such that anybody looking for him on this earth, need look no further than our own hearts and hands.

May it be so.

To the glory of God. Amen.