

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

*St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA*

*November 26, 2023*

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## The Righteous

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Christ the King Sunday is actually a relatively new addition to the church's liturgical calendar. While it has a longer history in the Eastern church, in the West it was introduced by Pope Pius XI in 1925. In a world still trying to make sense of the First World War, the hope was that a focus on Christ's rule might offer an alternative to empire and war. Unfortunately, that hope has still not been realized.

There is an interesting juxtaposition between celebrating the rule and Kingdom of Christ, and our text, which has Christ being identified with some very unkingly people. Let's be honest, we tend to associate rulers with the trappings of power and celebrity. Our leaders are surrounded by pomp and circumstance and largely kept in bubbles, away from the realities of the average person. That is just as true today as it was in the time of Christ.

But this is not true for Jesus. And that should cause some consternation in us, as it means a great deal for those of us trying to follow the Way of Christ. Frankly, the way of Christ would be significantly easier if Jesus were the sort of leader we're used to. In the usual arrangement, we largely get to ignore our leaders, at least until some decision of theirs affects us personally. But this is not so for following Christ! To attempt to follow the Way of Christ, to be Christian, means serving Christ...even in the here and now, and not in some abstract, theological way. But in a material and practical way.

Following the Way of Christ means going where Christ leads. Our text today makes it clear where Christ leads: to the hungry and thirsty, to the stranger and the naked, to the sick and imprisoned. And when our eyes are opened to where we can find Christ, then we are privileged to serve Christ where we find him. Our worship of Christ is in food prepared and served, water shared, welcome provided, clothing and shelter offered, as well as in comfort and healing for the ill and oppressed.

But I believe the parable says something even deeper than merely describing our calling as followers of the Way. I believe this teaching of Christ's says something profound about human righteousness. That word, "righteous," gets used a lot in our reading today; so, let me remind you of my suggested definition of that word: living as we were created to live. We should also note that the literary context of this parable establishes that this entire illustration is concerning "the nations."<sup>1</sup>

When we take this pericope in its entirety, we can read it as teaching us how we were created to live communally, or collectively. Righteous nations are the ones that take care of the hungry, the thirsty, the immigrant, the unhoused, the sick and the imprisoned. Why do those nations act that way? They have discovered that is the only healthy...righteous...way to act. When we are righteous, when we are living as we were created to live, we are healthy and whole. Our needs are met, and the needs of our neighbors are met. That is righteousness as Christ describes in our reading today.

From this perspective the use of sheep and goats is particularly illustrative. Rural Living Today says this about one of the differences between sheep and goats: "It has been said that shepherds protect sheep from getting injured by their environment, while goatherders protect the environment from their goats."<sup>2</sup> Sheep tend to act collectively, while goats are more prone to going their own way and doing their own thing. Rural Living Today goes on about sheep, "Sheep act as a social group, and their reactions are very dependent on others in their flock."<sup>3</sup>

When something threatens a flock of sheep, they turn toward each other. Their survival instincts are social. They understand that their best chance of survival is found collectively. Dr. Catherine Keller writes: "Sheep had connotations not of penned-in, passive, and pretty obedience, but of a roving co-existence in the wilderness. The parable puts a premium on that cooperative, peaceful spirit, countering the culture of competition and predation."<sup>4</sup>

The parable frames the sheep and the goats in the context of an eschatological metaphor. Salvation comes for everyone, or it doesn't come at

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 25:32 (NRSVUE)

<sup>2</sup> Head, G. (2023, November 16). Difference between sheep and goats to guide beginners. *Rural Living Today*. <https://rurallivingtoday.com/livestock/difference-between-sheep-and-goats/>

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Keller, Catherine. *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process*. United States, Fortress Press, 2007.

all. The sheep - the ones who live collectively so that destructive norms and systems do not define life or lives - they will, they **do** experience salvation. Spiritual well-being. Practices of reciprocal material care. Abundant life is possible for them.

In a divine twist, Jesus tells a story of those who are most generous and collective-oriented experiencing salvation while those who are selfishly focused bring about the very lack in their lives they were trying to avoid by hoarding or withholding. So goes the gospel. Such is the story of love that frees us from the seductive and destructive lies of individualism. Such is the fate of all who choose power and profits over people.

Advent begins next week. This is our peek ahead. This is a guide to recognizing the Spirit of Christ that will take on flesh in a baby born a refugee. The Spirit that was before Jesus and will remain after him. The Spirit that lives and dwells wherever love disrupts oppressive powers, care is collectively practiced, and engaging in solidarity forms new relational patterns. This is divinity with us. This is divine life. This is how we experience God with us. This is God in solidarity with us...how will we be in solidarity with God?

“Solidarity, not charity.” This phrase, now commonly associated with the work of mutual aid collectives, is an important one to read through today’s text. While charity - voluntary giving often from a relational distance - has its place from time to time within the structures we currently live under, when it becomes the primary mode of sharing resources, not only is it incomplete, it can also become a means of maintaining structural inequalities. As long as a relationship is a matter of one party giving and the other receiving, a power differentiation will always remain. And where a power differentiation remains, inequality does too.

Solidarity, however, begins and ends from a radically different relational posture. Solidarity - practiced across various forms of power differentials like gender, race, sexuality, ability, class - both acknowledges structurally built-in inequalities and strives to practice the kind of reciprocal relationship that breaks those cycles of inequality and creates new patterns of relating. The work of caring for each other depends on us and how we decide to show up in the world with and for each other. And that includes getting to know each other across social locations. Paying attention to what we have to offer and also to what our own needs are - spiritually, relationally, materially. It is a

recognition that we depend on each other and a choice to live positively not profitably out of that recognition.

On this Christ the King Sunday we celebrate, not a King in glory or majesty, but rather a King in solidarity. A king who willingly chooses to give up power and authority in order to identify with the powerless, the oppressed, the poor, the hungry, the “least of these.” And in that solidarity, we who claim to be followers of the Way, can discover a deep and powerful righteousness. The deep sort of righteousness that comes from living out a fundamental and defining purpose. Amen.