

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd. Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
Last Sunday After Pentecost
Christ the King
26 November 2017

Scripture readings:

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

Ephesians 1:15-23

Matthew 25:31-46

Politics! Do I have your attention? *[laughter]* Today, Christ the King Sunday, is in the calendar of the Church because of politics. It has only been in the calendar of the Church since 1925 - that's 92 years. It was established by Pope Pius XI. I remember Pope Pius XII, but not XI.

It is felt that the Sunday of Christ the King - which was originally supposed to be on the last Sunday in October - was probably in response to the very vigorous celebrations of the Reformation, particularly in Germany. Pep rallies for Luther and all that stuff. So the pope said, "*Well, I'll address that with the celebration of Christ the King.*" Luther probably would have appreciated the change in emphasis, but then it was moved to the last Sunday of the Church year where it is today.

It's also thought that Christ the King was established in response to the rise of dictatorships in Europe at the time which of course led to Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy and all the rest of it. It called the Church to remember who was really in charge of this godless world. "*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth and everything in it.*" Is it godless? Maybe it's just we who are godless.

And then we come to this marvelous gospel text about separating the sheep from the goats. Marta, who is here today, is the daughter of my neighbors from years ago. Do you remember your dad had a ram named Ben? He was about this big and he used to jump the fence. We were personal friends. But there were a couple of things I knew about Ben: he was obstinate, he was fat, he did push others around, he could get over the fence, and he stank. His nether parts - which were important for him being a progenitor - were as cruddy as the day is long, as well as pendulous.

Well, when thinking about shepherds and sheep, you know I have this problem with the great Victorian depiction of Jesus in most of the churches in Christendom - at least the Protestant churches - where the largest window is a picture of Jesus the Good Shepherd looking for the world like a bearded woman in a bathrobe with three poodles. Well, Ben taught me that that's not what sheep are like. There are other ideas of understanding what shepherds were in biblical times. In my home congregation where I grew up they replaced that window with a new one. The shepherd in that new window was depicted as a young man too young to grow a beard, in a tunic that was torn and patched, and sandals. He had a lamb over his shoulders - one place I would never put Ben or anything that Ben had that close to my face.

But in my experience of a goat who lived in that same yard at some point or another, I encountered a relatively clean animal and an intelligent beast who liked to be on top of things. When scriptures talk about separating the sheep from the goats, I'm always confounded because the sheep were the really cruddy and stupid ones and the goats are relatively clean and intelligent. It's known that an entire flock of sheep can be led to pasture by one intelligent goat.

So what's Jesus talking about separating the sheep from the goats? Well, there is a kind of religion - and we're all given to it at some time or another in our lives - of thinking that the purpose and goal of religion is to keep ourselves clean, kosher, to eat the right things, wear the right things, associate with the right people, to keep ourselves from being sullied and dirtied by "the world" - to keep ourselves pure and to save our own hides by being religious, staying on top of things, being smart. Wise, clean, and all that stuff looks religious, but when Jesus separates the crowd, those are the folks on the left. They're the ones, according to this gospel, headed for hell. It's the dumb and dirty and stupid and pushy ones and impolite ones and all the rest of it - for whom there is concern.

Well, why? I suppose that what Jesus is trying to suggest is that those who see religious behavior as the behavior of getting dirty rather than staying clean are the ones who get it right. What does it mean to get dirty religiously?

There's a man we all know - I could say his name, but I won't - who we all see on a bicycle with a weed-wacker. It's hard to be within a couple feet of him because he's got a lot in common with the ram Ben. But I know for a fact that the Locklins see that he's fed anytime he goes into Lori's. Get it?

"I was hungry and you fed me. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was lonely - and maybe even in forced loneliness in prison because I deserved it - but you came to visit me. I was naked and you gave me something to

wear.”

Jesus’ suggestion, it seems to me, is that religious behavior is the behavior of getting dirty, the behavior of seeing in every other human being - and that doesn’t mean the ones that smell nice or dress right or do it your way or agree with what you think - but in every human relationship where you meet someone else’s need - and it may just be the need of a smile - there you serve God.

And the opposite is also true. Where there is need and you do not address it, there God is not served by me and you.

And so it was this morning at six o’clock that my buddy Frank in Rome started by expressing his concern for the people who were shot dead at worship in a mosque earlier this week. Now those aren’t people with whom the pope is going to agree and who probably won’t agree much with the pope. Those are people we’re invited to be afraid of because they’re Muslims, and Muslims do terrible things - as if Christians haven’t!

In these relationships where human being are in extremis, where we do the dirty business of loving them for no other reason than for loving them, God is served.

I pumped gas yesterday at one of those places where you have to go in and pay first. I had a fifty dollar bill in my pocket so I gave it to the young woman at the cash register. When I went back she said, “*Oh, you came back for your eighteen dollars, did you?*” I said, “*Well, do you want it?*” No, she couldn’t do that. We had a banter going. My standard answer when people ask me how I am, I used to say “*miserable and cranky.*” It’s just to get a response. She said something about Christmas coming and Santa Claus watching, and I said, “*Oh, so you want to be nice to me just so you’ll get what you want.*” And she said, “*That’s not really being nice, is it?*” She got it! We had a theological discussion over pumping gas. Can you believe it? And so can you. The only person you have to have that discussion with is yourself.

Do we as people meet need when we see it because it’s there, not because it’s going to get us into heaven, not because we’re going to keep our rear ends out of hell and be damned forever, not for any other reason than this is God’s world and everybody in it - including us and our kind and including them and their kind - are God’s children. It’s all one family.

Oh yes, there are people to be afraid of. Yes, I understand. I get it. You’re seen that way, too, somewhere else in the world. Don’t forget that.

Jesus makes it very, very clear here in this gospel text that religion is simply the dirty business of taking care of each other - period. That’s all there is to it - loving the unlovable, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, quenching the thirst of the thirsty.

You know I always have arguments with the biblical text. The part I don’t like about this is that at the end of the text Jesus indicates that those who are on the wrong side - the goats, the clean, the pure, the religious, the...you know...that they all get sent to hell. I don’t think God bothers to send them to hell. I think they put themselves there by not realizing that every human relationship *is* an encounter with God - or at least the possibility - and they denied themselves all of that. They cheated themselves out of God by making themselves pure and holy and refusing to relate to those in need and those who were different and those who were strange and foreign and not like ourselves. That’s hell!

And so it is Jesus invites us to be filthy, dirty rams named Ben. Ben, by the way, is Hebrew for *son*. If you ever see the name of a synagogue with the word *Ben* in it, it means *son*. And so it is we’re invited to be sons and daughters of God by getting ourselves dirty in the business of loving and caring for each other. And don’t think that it’s all you doing the job for somebody else in need. Guess what? When we mature we find out that we have need, too. Then God comes to us as others come to us and serve us, not because we deserve it but because we are loved by God and by each other.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.