The Twenty-Sixth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 29)
St. Matthew 25:31-46

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats." This text can be one of great terror for you or one of great comfort. It all depends on how you hear it. And how you hear it depends on whether you are a sheep or a goat.

For, when Jesus returns on the Day of Judgment, all people will be divided before him, like the sheep and goats. This is not all dissimilar to the division in the two previous parables: wise and foolish virgins and faithful and faithless servants. According to this third parable, Jesus will welcome the righteous sheep on His right into everlasting life, like the wise virgins and faithful servants. The unrighteous goats, on the other hand, will be commanded to depart from His presence into everlasting fire, like the foolish virgins and unfaithful servants.

This alone is very comforting to the sheep. They will live forever in the glorious presence of Jesus. The Apostle John described what that will be like as he was given a vision of it. As you heard three weeks ago:

> These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. (Revelation 7:14b-17)

And again he wrote:

> Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away. (Revelation 21:3b-4)

On the last day, the King will tell those on His right that they treated Him well—feeding, clothing, and visiting Him—generally all of the things a person would do to take care of another whom they love and cherish, whom they want to keep around for a while. It's not unlike what Peter wanted to do on the transfiguration mountain for Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. (cf. Matthew 17:4) It's a task that came naturally to the sheep, without even a thought, as indicated by the question they asked Jesus: "When did we do these things?" Of course, the other thing it indicates—the part that Jesus answered—is that they never realized they were caring for Jesus. "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me."

The least of these my brothers… You who have heard me preach and teach for years now know that I teach of this text differently than modern Christendom does. The least of Jesus' brothers are the ones that He sends to proclaim Him crucified for the forgiveness of your sins to you.

It's no mistake that Jesus referred to Himself as the King in today's text. In the ancient world, kings would send messengers or envoys to other kings and nobility. These envoys—called angels in ancient Greek—could bear any kind of message, it didn't matter. And the practice at the time was that these messengers had to be respected and cared for by those who received them, even if the sender

and recipient were mortal enemies. Room and board, baths and pampering—the messenger, a mere man, was treated like royalty. After all, whatever the recipient did to the messenger, it was like he was doing it to the one who sent him; wars could be started for "killing the messenger."

That's the imagery that Jesus is using in this text. There are other passages of Scripture which support this understanding, as in Matthew 10, but it also does one well to understand the historical context in which Jesus said the things He said. Bear in mind, also, the messengers God sent throughout history, how His people dealt with them, and the wrath of God against them for this—those messengers were called prophets, and the remnant of His people could tell you stories about the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persian, and Medes.

Therefore, how do the sheep show love and respect to the Shepherd? They feed, clothe, and visit the messengers—generally do all of the things a person would do to take care of another whom they love and cherish, whom they want to keep around for a while. It's not that they necessarily do these things for the benefit of the person who is among them, but because they hear from this person the good news of their salvation and want to hear more of the same. The natural response of the regenerated person is to care for this messenger—to do the kinds of things that Peter wanted to do for Moses, Elijah, and Jesus on that particular mountain.

For the goats, however, on the Day of Judgment there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. They will burn in everlasting torment in the place prepared for the devil and his angels. The King might as well tell them that He does not know them because they refused to know Him in His messengers, a point the goats make in their retort to the King, you might have noticed! Once again, John had a vision of that, too:

> [T]he devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever. Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. (Revelation 20:10-11, 14-15)

Jesus will tell the goats that they treated Him with contempt, denying Him the things that the sheep gladly gave Him. Like the sheep, they wonder, but their wondering is slanted in a different direction. The ask a similar question to the sheep, but only to say that if they had known it was Jesus, they would have done a good work. And Jesus gives them a similar answer. "Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." If you're going to treat the King's messenger with contempt, you're going to receive contempt from the King. "I do not know you; away with you to the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." (cf. Matthew 25:12, 30, 41)

"Whoever receives you receives me," Jesus once told the least of His brothers. (Matthew 10: 40) "[A]s you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me." For sheep, this is a no-brainer. When one comes along proclaiming that sins are forgiven for the sake of the suffering, death, and resurrection of the Son of God, all without personal merit and righteousness, a sheep will do everything they can to keep hearing that message, caring for the messenger. When they do that to the messengers, they do that to Jesus. That's what He's saying in today's text.

Now, there may be a group of people who, hearing this, may wonder if they are sheep or goats; if they don't know, it's a sure bet to say that they are goats. Like the goats, they would wonder when they had ever seen Jesus, because they would certainly have done something for Him. Sheep are only shocked at the fact that they are told that they had done something; goats are shocked that they had seen Jesus—even if only in His messengers—and never knew it. Sheep don't keep track of what they

had done, as it shocks them to find out that they had done something; goats always look for something to do, but it has to be the right thing at the right time to the right person—all as they define right.

That's why I said before that this text can either be one of great terror or great comfort. If you're a goat, even if you don't know it, you will hear the text as something you must do in order to be in the glorious presence of Jesus for eternity. You will hear Jesus talk about clothing Him, feeding Him, visiting Him, etc., and hear Him tell you that these are the things He demands of you in order to gain His favor, that He expects you to do this to His messengers, even to all people! If this were the case, then everyone would be a goat, because no one of their own volition will ever do the things Jesus says the sheep do. The right thing at the right time and the right person would never come along, in the goat's estimation; nah, the Old Man would rather thank God that he's not like all these other people. (cf. Luke 18:11)

You might have guessed by my use of certain language that this also a temptation for the sheep, and it stems from a confusion of Law and Gospel and an error with regard to a false understanding of free will. The temptation comes when hearing Jesus tell the sheep that they have done these things, but then to believe that they must be done in order to *remain* a sheep and be granted a place in eternity. The thinking goes that it is Jesus, by way of His Holy Spirit, that make one a sheep—this part is true—but then it is incumbent upon the sheep to do what they can in order to remain a sheep—and this part is the error.

Here is the Law, dear hearers: the demand is present to regard everyone as if they are Jesus Christ, because everyone is someone for whom Jesus died, not only those He has sent to you to proclaim the good news to you. You see it in the second table of the Ten Commandments which tell you what you are to do and not to do with, to, and for your neighbor.

- Don't anger or despise parents and other authorities; serve, obey, love, and cherish them.
- Don't hurt your neighbor or unjustly take his life; help and support him in every physical need.
- Don't lead a sexually impure life in what you say and do; husband and wife love and honor each other.
- Don't take your neighbor's income or possessions; help him to improve and protect them.
- Don't lie about your neighbor or hurt his reputation; defend and speak well of him.
- Don't scheme to get or entice anything that belongs to your neighbor; be of service to him in keeping it and urge them to stay.

These things the Law demands that you do. Hear it from the lips of Jesus Himself, a place where you can draw the inference that loving neighbor is like loving God:

> The most important [commandment] is, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." The second is this: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these. (Mark 12:29-31)

You can draw the inference there that loving your neighbor is like loving God because the summary of the Law of God is that you love God and love your neighbor; however, the way Jesus put it is that you love God with your entire being and your neighbor as yourself—you and your neighbors are ones for whom Christ died!

So, the Law commands you to love God and love your neighbor. The Law also tells you that you do not do keep the Law. In fact, your will is so bound to sin, that you do precisely the opposite of what you are to do and not do. So, the Law demands that you deserve to die for breaking the Law.

By all accounts, according to the Law, you are a goat. And as a goat, you are destined to spend eternity in that place prepared for the devil and his angels.

That's where the Gospel comes in, though. The Gospel declares to you that Jesus Christ did everything that the Law requires of you. All that the Law demands of you—that you should not do and should do—Jesus has done and continues to do. In fact, Jesus clothes you, as you wear robes that are made white in His blood—the robes of Christ's righteousness given to you in the waters of Holy Baptism. Jesus even feeds you, as He gives you His very body and blood for your forgiveness, life, and salvation. Additionally, Jesus visits you in His Word, even as He has promised to be with you to the very end of the age. And all of this, dear hearers, He does for you.

Furthermore, the Gospel also tells you that the death that the Law demands for your sins, Jesus has suffered and died for you. The blood which washes your robes white was shed for you by Jesus, most especially from the cross. The body and blood which you eat and drink was given and shed for you by Jesus from the cross. Jesus has died your death that you may live.

This is what the least of Jesus' brothers should be proclaiming. And it is the soothing sound that the righteous sheep would do anything in their power to keep on hearing—feeding, giving drink, welcoming, clothing, and visiting the least of Jesus' brothers, and so much more.

Jesus has done it all for you. By all accounts, by the working of the Gospel on and in you, you are a righteous sheep. By the work that Jesus has done, you are made a sheep. And by the work that the Holy Spirit continues to do, you remain a sheep. So, then, when the least of Jesus' brothers proclaims this to you, the natural inclination of the regenerated heart—what the New Man in Christ wants to do—is to care for them, as if to say, "Stay a while and keep talking, we want to keep hearing it."

So, that's the comfort of this final parable of Matthew 25…of all three parables, in fact. The righteous sheep are ushered into eternity to live in the glorious presence of the Son of Man. What the sheep did is only secondary, a result of having been made sheep. All of this is solely by God's grace: that the sheep are made sheep, that the sheep spend eternity in the glorious presence of the Son of Man, and that the sheep do all of the things that they do.

And this is true of you, dear Baptized. You are sheep, because Jesus has made you His sheep; He is your Good Shepherd. And because He is your Good Shepherd, you are forgiven for all of your sins. Therefore, you will hear the Son of Man say to you on the Day of Judgment, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.