

**Apr. 7, 2019 – (Lent 5, The Sheep and the Goats)**

**Sermon Text – Matthew 25:31-46**

- [Jesus said], "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left...Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you'... And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me'...Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels'... Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you'...Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'" -

**Jesus began his teaching in Matthew's gospel with blessings for the poor, the meek, the outsiders and the persecuted. And now, here they are again, at the end of Jesus' teaching, the hungry, the thirsty, the strangers, the naked, the sick and the prisoners. The categories are changed slightly, but the idea is the same. The ones to be blessed are the least and the lost and the lonely, ones who are easily forgotten, who have no power in our world and who need our help. But now the blessing comes, not from Jesus, but from the people who minister on Jesus' behalf. It isn't a new idea. Think about the call of Abraham, way back at the beginning of Genesis, where he and Sarah are chosen by God and "blessed to be a blessing" to others. And it is a theme that will be picked up again and again in the writing of the New Testament. St. Paul writes to his young friend Titus, "I desire that you insist on these things, so that those who have come to believe in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works; these things are excellent and profitable to everyone." And James, writing about the treatment of others within the Christian community, says, "If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So, faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."**

**The point is that Jesus has made the basics of the faith very clear. When he was challenged about which commandment was the greatest, he answered, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" In his final parable, he spells it all out. Loving has to do with doing. It means feeding the hungry, giving a drink to those who are thirsty,**

welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, and visiting the sick and the imprisoned. Doing it has consequences. Not doing it has consequences. In the parable, the sheep and the goats learn the difference. The thing I find interesting about this is that both groups are surprised. The sheep never realized that they were doing something right. And the goats didn't know that they ever missed an opportunity to do anything for Jesus at all. The sheep simply minister to the needs of others. It's a part of who they are. The goats don't get it. They protest that they have never seen Jesus in need.

But Jesus makes it personal. Feeding, quenching, welcoming, clothing and visiting are ways of ministering, not just to the needy, but to him. In a few weeks, we will hear him say, "Lo, I am with always, even to the close of the age." Well, here he is, with us, for the rest of time, in "the least of these who are members of [his] family." When you minister to one such as this, you minister to me. And, perhaps, when one such as this, ministers to you, you have come to see Jesus.

The story is told of a boy living in a children's home. For grace at the dinner table, the headmaster usually prayed the common table prayer, "Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest..." After this happened several times, the boy said to him, "You always ask Jesus to come, but he never does. Will he ever come?" The headmaster said, "If we really want him to, he will." The boy thought, "I really want him to. So, I'm going to put a chair beside me tonight, so he'll have a place to sit when he comes." That evening, during supper, there was a knock on the door, and standing there was an old man, poorly clothed, cold and hungry. The headmaster invited him to join them for supper, and he pointed to the empty chair the boy had placed at the table. The man sat and ate, and the boy gladly passed food to him and even shared from his own plate. Later the boy said, "Jesus must not have been able to make it himself, so he sent this man in his place."

Exactly. Jesus comes to us, even today, but not always in the form we might expect. But our good deeds are not by themselves a means of salvation. That was taken care of long ago, when we were named and claimed as members of God's family, just as Paisley Lyn will be in a few minutes through the sacrament of Holy Baptism. The sheep in the parable receive the kingdom as an inheritance. It is theirs no matter what, as a gift from God. But their acts of mercy do put them in relationship with Jesus. They have been ministering to him, whether they knew it or not. And the goats? They were probably never going to get it anyway. They wouldn't have seen

**Jesus, even if he appeared in all his glory. That's the way it is. So, show your love. Do your ministry. Serve your neighbor. In so doing, you will be ministering to Jesus.**

**Amen.**