

Errors of Omission

Matthew 25:31-46

November 23, 2008

I.

Today is the last Sunday in Pentecost. It's the end of the church year. This is the last time you look at those service bulletins we have been using since May. And you might think that a new year's celebration is six weeks early. The church year, however, is based on the history of the church, and does not correspond to our calendar year, which is based on the earth's movement around the sun. We should not be surprised. Spiritual things can differ from worldly things.

This last Sunday of the year also is Christ the King Sunday. Today we see Jesus not in his usual role as teacher, preacher, or healer, but as the Messiah, coming again in glory to judge the world. All of our readings today reflect this theme.

Our Gospel reading also is the conclusion of a long discourse Jesus delivered to his disciples. Last week I mentioned how the stories of the last three weeks were part of a series of readings about the kingdom of heaven.

And last week's gospel about the slave banished to the outer darkness for failing to invest his master's money sets the stage for today's reading. Today Christ judges humanity and decides who enters God's kingdom and who is cast into the eternal fire prepared for the devil.

This reminds me of a story about an admiral who was visiting a U.S. Navy ship. He was talking with some enlisted men and asked, "What would you do if another sailor fell overboard?" One of the men said "I would raise the alarm and toss him a life preserver, sir." The admiral then asked a second question: "What would you do if it were an officer?" The enlisted man promptly replied, "Which officer, sir?"

The final outcome of this humorous story about whether or not an officer would be saved appears to depend upon what that officer had done, or failed to do, in his interactions with the enlisted men. The gospel reading is the same. Salvation depended on what the people did or did not do as they interacted with those who ranked beneath them in some way.

II.

When we think about this Gospel we ought to acknowledge that it is a difficult reading. It portrays God's judgment upon people who believed themselves to be Christians, but were denied entry into his kingdom. This might seem harsh, but the story is not ambiguous. It unequivocally described who would be saved and who would not, and why.

Even so, we must be careful about taking the story literally, but we should not be dismissive. Many modern Christians don't think much about judgment being based on what they have or have not done, and instead focus on God's love as their eternal hope. And God's love is central to our faith. It's an essential teaching of Christianity. But there is more to it. The Bible also is clear that the day will come when each of us must account for the content of our lives.

And that day is what today's Gospel is about. It tells of Jesus' second coming, and metaphorically describes how he will gather the people before him and separate them as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. People who are sheep will be on Jesus' right hand and will inherit God's kingdom. People who are goats will be on his left, and be sent away and eternally separated from him.

So, what was the difference between the sheep and the goats? What was the ticket out of the goat pen into the sheep pen? Sometimes we tend to associate God's judgment with bad

behavior, or immoral, unethical, or even criminal conduct. But that's not the lesson of today's Gospel. Today's lesson is something different. It's a story of errors of omission, so to speak.

Jesus explained by referring to himself. He began by telling how people cared for him in various ways when he was in need, or how they did not care for his needs. He spoke of when people fed him, and clothed him, and took care of him when he was sick. And he also spoke of when people did not do that.

At first this was confusing because people listening to him took him literally. As he began explaining, people thought back about whether or not they actually had cared for Jesus himself.

But that is not what he meant. Christ identified so closely with the people that their suffering was his suffering. This is why he said that when people cared for the least of humanity they cared for him, and when they rejected the least of humanity they rejected him. And the reading tells us the that choices they made during their lives about whether or not they cared for the needy finally determined whether they ended up on Jesus' right, or on his left.

III.

So, for us today, this reading would mean that our response to the least of humanity also is our response to Jesus. Helping the needy would be accepting Christ, and rejecting the needy would be rejecting Christ. If we take this story literally and look no further, we might believe that our future in eternity depends only upon whether or not we care for those less fortunate than ourselves.

But this lesson should not end there. There's more to it. And it raises some unspoken questions about how we understand our faith. What about belief in Jesus Christ? What about faith as a basis for salvation? Aren't we taught that we are saved by our faith?

St. Paul told us in Romans that "we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law" (3:28). This is echoed in Ephesians, which tells us that "by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works" (2:8).

And this is true. We are saved by faith. However, question then arises: How is saving faith defined? The answer also is in the Bible. James, the brother of our Lord, said, "Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (2:17). As a result, if a person claims to have faith but does not do the necessary good works, then that claim of faith could be misguided or unfounded from the beginning. It might not be true faith no matter how sincerely the belief is expressed.

This question of faith and works is similar to that in the parable two weeks ago where ten bridesmaids were invited to the wedding banquet, but only five brought sufficient oil for their lamps. And oil signified good works. Remember that? All ten bridesmaids were followers of Christ, but only the five with oil were saved.

Today's Gospel presents a similar situation. The people who ended up on Jesus' right and his left all thought they were Christians, but those unfortunate enough to be on the left were surprised by the outcome. And note here that the so-called goats were not condemned for doing something that was evil, illegal, or even morally wrong. Rather, their fate was determined because they failed to do good. Errors of omission were their downfall.

On one hand, that sort of raises the bar, doesn't it? But on the other, we should not be surprised. The Bible is full of stories, narratives and parables that teach us we are called to help others in need. And perhaps the Jesus' Great Commandment to love God and our neighbor says it all. We love God through our faith and we love our neighbors through our works. We don't have the option of going through life just serving ourselves and not helping others.

IV.

So, at this point, if we take today's Gospel to heart, it might not be unreasonable to feel a little uneasiness. We might wonder how we can avoid these errors of omission. That's where the church enters the picture.

Jesus not only was speaking to the people who heard his voice, but also was speaking to the church through the ages he would leave behind. He not only was metaphorically describing some examples of our salvation as individuals, but also was leading us to understand that we can take those examples into the mission of the church. We are called to faith, and the church is called to mission, and through the church we can do the work that our faith calls us to do.

This is evident from the catechism of our church at page 855 of the Book of Common Prayer. It says that "the Church carries out its mission through the ministry of all its members." That's us; people here in church today.

From time to time I have speculated about what would happen if Jesus returned to earth early, *incognito*, to get a look at things before he really returns. Now, I realize that Scripture doesn't say anything about a sneak preview, and in fact his real return is described in today's Gospel. But I ask that you indulge me anyway.

If he came early, where would we find him? It would be where he always was. We would look for him today in the same places where people would have looked two thousand years ago. He would be with the poor, the needy, those rejected by society, and those for whom hope is a distant memory.

But this all is hypothetical. When Jesus returns it will be for real. Until then, we are called to do his work. I always have cherished the words of St. Theresa of Avila, a sixteenth century nun known for her contemplative writings of Christ. Her words recognize that even though Christ's spirit is here in the church, it is up to us to take him into the world in the name of the church. She said:

Christ has no body but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

V.

So, here we are. The end of the church year brings us full circle. During the past year we walked with Christ through the Gospels, and shared the significance of the manger and the calling of the disciples. We stood at the cross and renewed our eternal hope through our Lord's resurrection. We heard once again how the Holy Spirit transformed the disciples, and we were witnesses to the inspired stories of Jesus' teachings to the church he left behind.

And no matter how often we come to this point, the stories never grow old. It seems there always is something new and exciting that strengthens and comforts us, even as it challenges us. And it has been that way for countless generations over two thousand years. How is such a thing possible? How can the greatest story ever told remain so new and vital and alive?

Jesus Christ is the answer. He is King of kings and Lord of lords, and he calls us to do in the world now what he did when he was alive. And the church is the way that he left for us to do it until he comes again. It is up to us to be his hands and feet, and to be his body. *Amen.*