**November 23, 2014 – Feast of Christ the King (Last Sunday after Pentecost)**

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Today is the very last day of our liturgical year. Next week, if you can believe it, is the first Sunday of Advent. So today is the last day we get to hear from our old friend, Matthew, and he’s got a doozy for us.

On the surface, this parable of the sheep and the goats seems to be one of judgment and punishment. If we don’t do the things God wants us to do, we’re going to the everlasting fire. This certainly is the message we hear in a lot of churches. If you don’t stop drinking and dancing, you’re going to hell. If you don’t go exclusively to our church, and follow only our rules, you’re going to hell. If you live a certain lifestyle that we disapprove of, you’re going to hell. God will judge you by what you do, this parable seems to say.

But is that true? If so, it would seem that we could act, or buy, our way into salvation, with no need for grace. But if THAT were true, there would be no need for Jesus to die on the Cross, and our whole faith comes tumbling down like a house of cards. So I’m going to go out on a limb here, and say that that interpretation is NOT true.

So what IS Jesus trying to tell us here? There’s a very funny joke going around Facebook right now, that might help to illustrate this. It’s called:

**The Holy Bible, the TL, DR version (TL, DR stands for “too long, didn’t read,” for those of us older than seventeen)**

**GENESIS**

God: All right, you two, don’t do the one thing. Other than that, have fun.

Adam & Eve: Okay.

Satan: You should do the thing.

Adam & Eve: Okay.

God: What happened?

Adam & Eve: We did the thing.

God: Guys….

**THE REST OF THE OLD TESTAMENT**

God: You are my people, and you should not do the things.

People: We won’t do the things.

God: Good.

People: We did the things.

God: Guys….

**THE GOSPELS**

Jesus: I am the Son of God, and even though you have done the things, the Father and I still love you and want you to live. Don’t do the things any more.

Healed people: Okay! Thank you!

Other people: We have never seen him do the things, but he probably does the things when no one is looking.

Jesus: I have never done the things.

Other people: We’re going to put you on trial for doing the things.

Pilate: Did you do the things?

Jesus: No.

Pilate: He didn’t do the things.

Other people: Kill him anyway.

Pilate: Okay.

Jesus: Guys….

**PAUL’S LETTERS**

People: We did the things.

Paul: Jesus still loves you, and because you love Him, you have to stop doing the things.

People: Okay.

**PAUL’S LETTERS PART II**

People: We did the things again.

Paul: Guys….

**REVELATION**

John: When Jesus comes back, there will be no more people who do the things. In the meantime, stop doing the things.

**THE END**

This is funny and silly, but it also reveals a pretty big truth about our relationship with God. We keep doing the things. We keep sinning and falling short. And God keeps forgiving us. God’s faithfulness to us is everlasting. So it seems unlikely that specific actions or lack of actions on our parts will affect our salvation.

So why put this in at all. Just to scare us into being good? The people in the parable don’t seem scared. They seem confused. The “sheep,” or those spoken well of by the King, were just as surprised to find out that they had done something right as the “goats” were to find out they hadn’t.

In the Old Testament, God made a series of covenants with his chosen people. A covenant is an agreement between two parties, with certain stipulations on either side. Specifically, the covenants with God would be described as a Suzerain Covenant, which, historically was an agreement between a king and a vassal. This is WAY oversimplifying both these kinds of treaties and God’s relationship with his people, but the takeaway is this. When God entered into this arrangement with his people, it was permanent. If the people didn’t hold up their end of the bargain, they felt God’s wrath, and often for a generation, but the covenant wasn’t broken.

As my silly example shows, mankind has failed, time and time again, to live up to our side of the covenant with God, but yet God is still faithful.

Jesus speaks of a new covenant. In Matthew 26:28, during the last supper, he says, “…this is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” That was his side – dying for us. And he has clearly laid out our side of this new covenant for us in Matthew 22, when he said, “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.’

This is what he’s talking about here. By following those two commandments, the “sheep” in this parable are keeping up their side of the agreement, and the result of this is that the least of their brothers and sisters are cared for. If we love God and our neighbors, it happens automatically. We don’t have to think about it. And in caring for the least among us, we are caring for Jesus. Plain and simple.

Mother Teresa, for much of her ministry in Calcutta, cared for those whom society had cast off – the poorest of the poor, the dying, and those ill with untouchable diseases like leprosy. When asked why she did what she did, Mother Teresa was quoted as saying, “Every day I see Jesus Christ in all his distressing disguises.” She saw Jesus in the least of them.

We have our own “least of these” in our country – the very poor, the immigrants, those suffering from addiction, the mentally ill. And frankly, we’re doing a terrible job of welcoming them, clothing them, feeding them, visiting them, and taking care of them when they’re sick. What we, as a society, do instead, is blame them for their poverty and call it a moral failing, castigate them for not knowing our language and for taking menial jobs that no one else wants anyway, shame them for their addiction, and ignore them in their illness. We are the richest and most powerful nation on earth, and yet someone froze to death on the Cheyenne River JUST THIS PAST WEEK! What’s wrong with us? No, we’re not going to hell for it, but I don’t imagine God is pleased.

All anyone with any influence in this country seems to care about these days are money and power. Or, for variety, power and money. People, in general, come in a distant third, and the poor and disenfranchised don’t even make it on the care radar. It’s deplorable, and we should be ashamed.

Since it’s quite obvious that the powers that be in this country are not going to step up to the plate, we’ve got to do it. We’ve got to start by loving God with every fiber of our being, and then we have to turn that love – that agape – into action and love our neighbors – ALL of our neighbors – Jesus in all his distressing disguises – with that same passion and energy. That’s our part of the covenant that brought about the salvation of our souls.

“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.” Who are the least of us among us right now, today? The ones who freeze to death on the reservations, certainly. The ones who lose their job because of who they’re related to, I think count. How about those who drink themselves to sleep each night because they’re so lonely? How about the woman with two kids, who’s in prison right now because of some bad choices she made? How about those parents who will go to sleep hungry tonight so that their kids can eat? How about the gay teenager on the brink of suicide because it just seems easier than living?

Everywhere we turn, we have the opportunity to serve Jesus by serving his brothers and sisters – OUR brothers and sisters. Let’s go out and do that, for the love of God in Christ Jesus!

Amen.