

Sunday of the Fulfillment, 2008 (Proper 29A)

Text: Matthew 25:31-46

Title: Is Jesus Wrong?

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What did you think of today's gospel lesson?

From the sound of things, Jesus gets it wrong. We all know that we are saved by grace through faith, right? We all know that we are not saved by doing good works, right? Most of you have been Lutherans long enough that your Lutheran radar starts going off when people start talking this way, saying that someone is getting into heaven because they've lived a good life. So what's going on in today's gospel lesson?

Jesus separates the righteous from the unrighteous, the sheep from the goats. The sheep are on the right hand side and get eternal life. The goats are on the left hand side and get eternal fire.

What's the difference between a sheep and a goat? How does Jesus describe things? The sheep are those who have fed the hungry, given drink to the thirsty, shown hospitality to the stranger, clothed the naked, and visited the sick and those in prison. The goats are those who have failed to do all these things.

So does this mean that you get to heaven by doing good works- by helping out those in need?

This doesn't seem to fit what God tells us elsewhere in the Bible. We all know Paul's words from Ephesians 2:8-9, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith. And this not of yourselves. It is the gift of God, lest anyone boast." So who's right- Paul or Jesus?

Now if Jesus really is saying that we get into heaven by doing good deeds, helping our neighbor and those in need, why is Jesus going to Jerusalem to die? If all it takes to get into heaven is donating a few canned goods to the food pantry, then why does Jesus have to die? Couldn't he just teach us to be more generous and giving? Why do we need the cross, and Good Friday if all we need to do is help those in need?

Well, let's take a closer look at exactly what Jesus says here. These words are the conclusion to the last public sermon that Jesus gives. Matthew 26:1 reads, "When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, "As you know, the Passover is two days away—and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified." After this comes the Last Supper, Gethsemane, and Good Friday. These words are what are to remain with us, to get us through the rest of Holy Week, on to Easter morning and beyond.

The key to Jesus' words is the phrase, "Whatever you did for the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me." Who are the "least of these brothers of Jesus"? The answer comes earlier in the book of Matthew.

In Matthew 12, Jesus' mother and His brothers come to look for Him. He's teaching His disciples, but His family is standing outside. When Jesus is told that His mother and brothers are looking for Him, Jesus says, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" Pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."

Here Jesus explains who His brothers are. It's His disciples. They are doing the will of the Father by listening to Jesus and following Him. They are part of Jesus' family. God is their Father and Jesus is their brother. Jesus' own mother and brothers are on the outside. They are not among His disciples. His true brothers are His disciples, those who listen to Him, follow Him, and do the Father's will.

When Jesus talks about His brothers, when Jesus says, whatever you do for the least of these brothers of mine, He's not talking about just anyone who is in need. He's specifically talking about the disciples. Now please don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying that we shouldn't help those around us in need. We should definitely help to feed the hungry. Jesus says many things about helping the poor and assisting those who are in need. But that's not what Jesus is getting at here, in this specific instance.

If we back up a few more chapters to Matthew 10, Jesus explains this further. In Matthew 10, Jesus sends out His twelve disciples to preach and to heal. This is their first go, a short-term mission trip, or a vicarage, so to speak.

Jesus gives the disciples very detailed instructions on where they are to go and what they are to do. They are not to take many supplies along for the journey. No extra money or extra clothes. Instead, they are to rely on the hospitality of those who receive them. Jesus warns the disciples that their mission will be dangerous. They will be arrested and beaten. Many will reject them and their message.

Jesus completes His instructions to His disciples with these words: "He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me. Anyone who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and anyone who receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man's reward. And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward."

These words of Jesus help us to understand what He says about the sheep and the goats. Jesus is not just telling us to be charitable and generous (even though we should). Our eternal salvation does not depend on such things.

When Jesus says, "Whatever you did for the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me." He is not talking about random people in need. The brothers of Jesus are the disciples. The

disciples are the ones who will bear Christ to all nations. When Jesus sends out His disciples, He tells them, "I will be with you always to the end of the age." When the disciples go out to baptize and teach, Jesus goes with them in a very real way. They stand in the stead of Christ. They speak the words of Christ. When the world hears the disciples, they hear Christ. So how the world treats the disciples is how the world treats Christ.

Jesus says to His disciples, "He who receives you receives me." The fate of the world will be judged based on how they receive the disciples and their message. Those who ignore Jesus' messengers and their message, who refuse to show them hospitality, and even cast them out of their community or into jail- they will be judged, for in rejecting Jesus' apostles, they are rejecting Jesus. Jesus says that in those situations the disciples are to shake the dust from their feet, and those people will be worse off than Sodom and Gomorrah.

But those who receive the disciples, who welcome them in, who give them food and drink and clothing, who visit them when they are sick or in prison, they are receiving Jesus and showing kindness to Him.

They do those things because they have been given faith to believe the disciples' message. They hunger and thirst to hear more about Jesus' love for them. They show kindness to the disciples, because they bear Jesus.

These words of Jesus are meant to comfort the disciples. After Jesus' death and resurrection they will be sent out again. In many places they will be received, but in others they will be rejected. They will be imprisoned and many will be killed. The entire world, all the nations will be judged based on how they receive the Jesus' disciples and their message. Jesus is telling His disciples that He will go with them and that how people treat them is how they treat Him.

So where does that put us?

We are God's flock, His sheep, His people, His church. As we sang in the psalm, the Lord is a great God, who holds the whole world in His hands, from the depths of the earth to the heights of the mountains, the sea and the dry ground- he made them all. And yet He still cares for us. We are the people of His pasture and the sheep of His hand.

Our heavenly Father has made us righteous and prepared an eternal inheritance for us in heaven. He does it all. You are not God's flock because of your good deeds, but because of what the Lord has done for you. You know that you are sinful, that you have sinned against the Lord in thought, word, and deed, by what you have done and by what you have left undone. There are times when you have failed to help those in need, when you have passed by on the other side instead of giving generously.

Furthermore, there are many outside the church who are known for their good deeds, for their generosity and their philanthropy.

What makes you different is that you have received Christ. You have been baptized. You have been taught. You have willingly accepted the work of Jesus' brothers, the disciples, the pastors

and teachers in your life. By receiving them, you have received Christ. By showing kindness to them, you have shown kindness to Christ.

One day you will be judged. You will stand before the Lord in all His glory with His angels standing around. And on that day it will not be all about you. When the Lord speaks about you and what you've done, your reaction will be, "Who, me? I don't remember doing any of those things."

The fact that you have received the Lord and His messengers came to you as a gift. It was not based on your will or decision, but the working of the Holy Spirit. Through Holy Baptism, through the preaching of God's Word, the Holy Spirit has created faith in your heart. And faith says, "Yes, I'd like to hear more." Faith is what brings you hear every week to hear God's word and to give to Him your gifts to support the preaching of His word. It's not something you can chalk up to yourself and your own goodness and generosity. It's all Jesus, it's all faith, it's all gift. So that one day you will say, "I don't remember doing those things." Because faith will have done them, that is to say, Jesus will have done them through you.

So, as it turns out Jesus and Paul do agree, oh and Luther, too. Jesus doesn't teach one thing and Paul another. We are sheep saved by grace who live by faith. The Lord has given us His righteousness and with that comes eternal life.