

Sermon: Advent III

The Rev. Mike Wernick

November 23, 2014

Year B

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

Psalm 100

Ephesians 1:15-23

Matthew 25:31-46

On June 28, 1914... Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria... heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne... and his wife, Sophie... Duchess of Hohenberg... were shot dead... by a group whose political objective was to break off Austria-Hungary's south-Slav provinces... so they could be combined into a Yugo-slav-ia... Austria-Hungary subsequently issued an ultimatum against Serbia... which was rejected... and the assassination led directly to the First World War...

On December 11, 1925... the Roman Catholic Church instituted Christ the King Sunday... that's where we get it from... in establishing this feast... the Papal Encyclical said... *It is not necessary, Venerable Brethren, that We should explain to you at any length why We have decreed... that this feast of the Kingship of Christ should be observed in addition to those other feasts... in which his kingly dignity is already signified and celebrated... it will suffice to remark that although in all the feasts of our Lord... the material object of worship is Christ... nevertheless their formal object is something quite distinct from his royal title and dignity...*

When Christ the King Sunday began... it was celebrated on the last Sunday of October... seemingly in opposition to Reformation Sunday... that was probably just a coincidence... but they explained... that it seemed the most convenient date of all for this purpose... since it was near the end of the church year... and came immediately before the Triumph of All Saint's Day... and its institution was probably influenced too... by the events of WWI and the rise of secularism in the world... as a way of affirming Christ's transcendent Kingship...

In Ezekiel... we hear about royal... Davidic judgment... against the fat sheep who have used their *flank and shoulder*... to push and scattered the weak sheep far and wide... the LORD says that God's flock will be saved... and they will no longer be ravaged... and God will judge between sheep and sheep...

In our collective consciousness... we come to today's Gospel with images of judgment and exclusion... we come to this Gospel with images from classic literature... paintings... and cinema... which associate goats with evil... and with Satan... no wonder they're being cast into eternal fire... we come to this Gospel with a judgment that reflects our limited human need... for finality and certainty... no wonder that so much energy goes into a *human* effort at separating the good from the bad...

But fluffy... wooly sheep... whom the Good Shepherd shepherds... aren't inherently good... and tin can-eating mountain climbing goats aren't intrinsically bad... in fact... when we look at Exodus 12:5... where God is describing how to select and prepare the Paschal Lamb... whose blood would mark the Egyptian doorposts of the Israelites who'd be saved when the Angel of Death passes over... God says... *Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; and you may take it from the sheep... or from the goats*... so if goats had an inherently evil nature... it's hard to imagine that God would allow the Israelites to use them to signal their redemption...

Pastor David Sprang from the Synod... who was with us on November 2... recently wrote for the synod's newsletter about the themes of a seven week Advent... and when he reflected on the Gospel from November 9... of which today's Gospel is a continuation...he wrote... to make these parables legalistic... to make them about judgment... who's in and who's out... misses the point... they're about waiting and watching... and shining the light as we wait... they're about waiting and watching... but not sitting still... they're about active waiting... waiting while being engaged in the world... whether it's Christ's face we see... or someone else's...

And Fr. Robert Capon writes about *today's* Gospel: in the Great Judgment... all of the scenes of Jesus' earlier parables come full circle... in this parable... Jesus goes out of his way to stipulate that the Son of Man... will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats... Do you see what that means?... he asks... Jesus is the Good Shepherd and the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep... but he lays down his life for the goats as well... because on the cross he draws ALL to himself... it is not that the sheep are his... but the goats are not... the sheep are His sheep... and the goats are His goats...

Accordingly... Jesus' drawing of ALL to himself... remains the ultimate gravitational force in the universe... nothing... not even evil... is ever exempt from it... hell doesn't have a choice... but to be within the power of the final party... even though it refuses to act as if it is AT the party... it lies not so much outside the festivities... as it is sequestered within them... it may even get sent downstairs to sulk... it is hidden... if you will... in the spear wound in Christ's side... to keep it from being a wet blanket on the heavenly proceedings... but it is not... for all that... any less a part of Jesus' catholic shepherding of his flock...

I'm confident that every single one of you here now... has seen a young child make a mistake... and without missing a beat... you were able to forgive them... know that they did what they did... because they didn't know any better...

When I was about ten years old... I often spent time at my aunt and uncle's home... my mother's sister... and she had a daughter who was fifteen... and my cousin and her girlfriend would hang out and talk about boys... and in a fifteen year old way... they said that one of the boys they really liked... had big lips... well... one day when I was there... this boy was on the phone with them... and for whatever reason... they thought it'd be fun for me to say hello to him... and when I got on the phone... almost the first thing I said... was what they would never have wanted me to say... that Rita and Addy thought he had big lips... well... these two girls were mortified beyond belief... and I quickly

realized that I'd been thrown out of the party... and I cried... and my aunt came and hugged me... and told me that everything would be all right... and it felt... I imagine... like being held by God...

That kind oneness eliminates the need to judge... but our human need to feel superior feeds our desire for judgment... so we can believe that we're in and others are out... and in this parable... Capon says... it's so easy to make the cursed goats at the King's left hand... into bad people loaded down with sins of omission... and it's even easier to make the blessed sheep at his right hand into do-gooders...

But all we have to do is remember the Prodigal Son... who is not portrayed as cleaning up his life... only accepting his father's acceptance... that the eleventh hour laborers are not shown as having earned their pay by twelvefold exertions... only as having trusted the vineyard owner... and that the publican is not sent home justified because he said he would lead a better life... but because he had the faith to confess his death and to trust in the God who could raise the dead...

So it's not works that make the difference... but faith... something on which to set one's heart... in fact... in the sixteenth century... to believe meant *to set the heart upon...* or *to give the heart to...* as in giving one's heart to Christ... it was only in the centuries after the Enlightenment that belief became associated with facts...

And so there's a kind of divisiveness we still read into this parable... that's part of why Capon says... that today's parable... based in faith... should not be read as turning the Good Shepherd... into the wolf...

But human judgment is one of the things that casts us into darkness... in October... a Florida judge sentenced Michael Dunn to life in prison without parole for the 2012 shooting death of 17-year-old Jordan Davis... during an argument over loud music... We all remember the shooting of Trayvon Martin...

And this past Monday... ahead of a Grand Jury's decision on whether to indict Ferguson, MO police officer Darren Wilson in the killing of Michael Brown... Missouri's governor declared a state of emergency... has called in the National Guard... and diminished the role of the police department... as a precaution he said... in the event of unrest or violence...

But feeding into this violence... and also in anticipation of the Grand Jury's decision... gun sales have surged... in an interview on Friday... the owner of the Ultimate Defense Firing Range in St. Charles... right across the river from Ferguson... said that he used to sell three to five guns a day... but now he's selling 20 to 30...

We're seeing some of our collective darkness now in Ferguson, MO... it's so hard for us to let go of the rush to judgement... and to sometimes act as jury and executioner too... but it's not limited to that place... there's a kind of tribalism that affects all of us... no matter where we are... just because we have a black President doesn't mean we're done with racism... we're being forced to acknowledge that we still carry the seeds of racial prejudice and social injustice within us... within our national consciousness... and within the systems which built and made this country what it is... which disproportionately benefit so few... while so many others have done the heavy lifting...

Do we see the face of Christ in a black Jordan Davis... or Trayvon Martin... or Michael Brown... do we recognize it... do we approach our decisions to offer anyone food... or drink... or welcome... or clothing... or care... or fellowship... with a *what's in it for me attitude*... or do we simply decide... like the Benedictines do... to treat everyone we meet... as though they *are* Christ...

As we continue our Advent journey... as we wait... and watch... and engage the world... let's remember that while our actions do have physical and spiritual consequences... while we are accountable... God's saving grace... love... and redemption don't depend on us... Christ is the Shepherd King who draws ALL to

himself... and who can contain and manage whatever we call good... and whatever we call evil... making whole whatever is broken within us... even that deepest brokenness called death... and how... and to whom that happens... is not ours to judge.

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