

Anticipating Christ

Menno Mennonite Church

November 22, 2020

Purpose: To explore the vision of Christ's coming offered in Matthew.

Message: Christ with us remains the watch word of our anticipation of the coming Christ, just as it was from the very beginning.

Scripture: Matthew 25: 31-46 (Sermon Text); Psalm 100

Synopsis: We are driven by comparison. Given the opportunity, we always prefer to compare and contrast ourselves, our way of being in the world with other people. Not only are we naturally given to categorization and filing as means of making sense of the world, it serves us as a guide to knowing where it is we stand.

The text of Matthew's anticipation of Christ's returning to judge the world and the church with it drives us to think in these two terms. The metaphor of the sheep versus the goats all but demands it. Yet it is worth noticing the commonalities of the story too. Both parties are unsuccessful at recognizing the Christ; the failure to see the holy is universal. The differentiation comes with how one, not necessarily anticipating the holy, embraces the humanity before them come what may. Building on the themes developed this week (Matthew 25:14-30) this further places the work of discipleship less on the performance of tasks and more on the perception we are given in anticipating the way of Christ.

Liturgically this is Christ the King Sunday

Matthew 25:31-26:2 (The Message)

“When he finally arrives,
blazing in beauty and all his angels with him,
the Son of Man will take his place on his glorious throne.

Then all the nations will be arranged
before him and he will sort the people out,
much as a shepherd sorts out sheep and goats,
putting sheep to his right
and goats to his left.

“Then the King will say to those on his right,
‘Enter, you who are blessed by my Father!
Take what’s coming to you in this kingdom.
It’s been ready for you since the world’s foundation.

And here’s why:

I was hungry and you fed me,
I was thirsty and you gave me a drink,
I was homeless and you gave me a room,
I was shivering and you gave me clothes,
I was sick and you stopped to visit,
I was in prison and you came to me.’

“Then those ‘sheep’ are going to say,

‘Master, what are you talking about?
When did we ever see you hungry and feed you,
thirsty and give you a drink?
And when did we ever see you sick or in prison and come to you?’

Then the King will say,

‘I’m telling the solemn truth:
Whenever you did one of these things
to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me
—you did it to me.’

“Then he will turn to the ‘goats,’
the ones on his left, and say,

‘Get out, worthless goats!
You’re good for nothing but the fires of hell.

And why? Because—

I was hungry and you gave me no meal,
I was thirsty and you gave me no drink,
I was homeless and you gave me no bed,
I was shivering and you gave me no clothes,
Sick and in prison, and you never visited.’

“Then those ‘goats’ are going to say,

‘Master, what are you talking about?
When did we ever see you hungry or thirsty
or homeless or shivering or sick
or in prison and didn’t help?’

“He will answer them,

‘I’m telling the solemn truth:

Whenever you failed to do one of these things
to someone who was being overlooked or ignored,
that was me—you failed to do it to me.’

“Then those ‘goats’ will be herded to their eternal doom,
but the ‘sheep’ to their eternal reward.”

When Jesus finished saying these things, he told his disciples,

“You know that Passover comes in two days.
That’s when the Son of Man will be betrayed
and handed over for crucifixion.”

Part of the fun of athletics is knowing which team your on. It's a point of pride to get all riled up about who is on what team and how our team, whomever they might be, was going to beat the other team on the basic merits of who and what they were, never mind the actual players on the field. There is something to be said for team spirit and pitting the one against the next. Getting dressed up in your team colors and cheering for the home squad is some of the point after all. Unless of course you happen to attend a Mennonite Institution of higher education. Somehow we have never had the where-with-all to select proper mascots. Maybe it would mess up our piety or something. You all will have to forgive me, but the true menace of a large stone threshing wheel as with the Bethel College Threshers is negated fairly effectively by level ground.

Not that I have any room to mock. I attended Goshen College, home of the Maple Leafs (scary, I know). When your team mascot is subject to the whims of a gentle breeze, you are starting at a bit of a disadvantage. The best that can be said for it was that the logo when painted in purple on a rusting vehicle as my friend and I did by hand it gains you a good deal of attention from law enforcement when you are driving cross country for the intercollegiate peace fellowship meeting. Athletically; not so much, at least in my day. Not that this stopped us from having some fun with it in composing songs about how we would fight and win in a pacifistic sort of way—you know—go fight win, but not too hard. No wonder we gravitate to the state schools with both a better program to watch and a decent notion like the Cougars to cheer on.

I consider this because this is how we read this text most of the time: as a matter of teams. There is a bit of competition to be had here—being on team sheep and not on team goat, and being among the ones who get what Jesus was on about the whole time and do what he has in mind and get it right. Again, we are drawn to the notion of earning the praise of the master for getting it right. My parents, children of the 60's church as much as their conservative backgrounds would allow, had and still have this as the only scripture displayed on the wall in their study on an orange and black rendering of Jesus' words of judgement of the sheep and goats and the outcome of compassion—a true product of its time. The lesson was clear to embrace the way of the sheep and to implement the compassion of the leading Christ and to get the right answer to the way things ought to be. We can celebrate the kingship of Christ knowing that it is the team that gets it right and receives its just reward. That is how I have read this, and I am guessing that I am not alone. We get this right and know our calling to be about the work of

God in all places and all times. Like wearing the team colors, Matthew's analysis of the rewards of this way is clear and ready to be embraced. There is judgement, yes; harsh judgement at that, and that is never really all that comfortable. Too often the church has leaned more on its ethos of superior morality and its claims of being good rather than actually doing what it must. There is a reckoning happening with the past of the church, and we rightly stand in discomfort at times and wonder exactly where we might have done something different.

But what strikes me here is not how clearly one group stands apart from the other. As much as we like to think it, I suggest that there is much here that speaks to the commonality of the Sheep and the Goats as much as it does to the individual distinctions that we might expect to see. These are not the conventional set of sinners we ascribe to the workings of judgement at the end—the ones who we may silently suggest their lives might have a surprise waiting for them at the end of time based on their observed failing right now. There is no implication here that these are particularly bad people who committed any of the deadly sins or particularly were estranged from God or the Kingdom of God. There is even no particular failing articulated in their faithfulness to the Lord. They were looking, it seems, for the Lord in their midst—they just didn't happen to find what they were looking for in front of them. They sought the Lord; they just happen to find what they were looking for.

In that, they don't even stand out. What struck me this week is that the two groups are not in their groups because one happened to apprehend the presence of the Lord and the other did not. Their responses to the revelation of what was done to the least is all but identical and neither of them display a particular aptitude for getting the right answer on the exam to end all exams. They are equally blind to the Christ of their midst. The only real differentiation is in the life actions of those who, while blind, stumbled forward into the wanting world all the same with compassion and response. The sheep do not get themselves on the right team for possessing any particular insight or inclination over anyone else. They simply live the way of the world as Jesus did—noticing people who are in need of being noticed and acting on that inclination to do something in the meantime. To be sure; when we get involved in noticing and working to receive people with God's hospitality things get awfully messy awfully fast. We sometimes come up with some good reasons to just keep on walking as if we did not see. But that, in the end, cannot be our only response if we mean to be on team Jesus. David Mosser sums up Jesus'

proclamation well here in suggesting that “at the end of the day it matters less that we had faith than if we did faith it seems.

Matthew has a way of doing that to us—of turning the narrative as we expect it on its head. There are the things that we know the things that we expect—to be a good person, to profess the right things and lead the right life. And then Matthew’s Jesus keeps coming along and poking holes in our inclination to turn the good news of gospel liberation into yet more law for us to follow. It is a little painful to time and again wonder at the writing, what it means for us, and to somewhere at the back of our heads wonder which side we might find ourselves on. This is disturbing to our individual consciousness; it can be disturbing to our national conscious when we consider how we as a society do and do not value those existing on our margins. As much as judgement and the day of judgement might strike fear in our hearts, we much always remember that God does not see the story of our lives as we see our story. God sees as God sees—knowing love in that which we find most unlovable in our selves. As such, this becomes our saving grace.

At the end of the day it seems that the score is not kept according to the differentiations that we so often value as much as the commonalities to which we cleave, even when it is hard: that pain is pain even if it is seeming coming from a preventable location of personal choice and individual stories. That the nature of humanity is to reflect the nature of God and we are to respond accordingly. In short, as is borne out by the context of this discourse right before the passion and resurrection of the teacher, what matters here is how we behave when we think that God is not around. Preacher Barbara Brown Taylor suggests that: the sheep and goats, it seems, only focused on their behavior while Jesus was looking, but once he was gone, they had "lots of free time for being with the other people in their lives, including the ones who did not count--the little ones, the least ones--the waitresses, the door-to-door magazine salesmen, the nursing home residents, the panhandlers, the inmates, the strangers at the grocery store... We are called to look at each other and see Christ."

In these days of finding our way forward together in the midst of many challenges and indeed outright threats where we are time and again offered ways to paint each other stupid and other, we do well to remember that the sight that counts at the end of the day is not our assessment, our idea, our ability to see at all. Rather it is the invitation to see again and again God with us in the meantime, serving and being served.

May we be given the sight to see beyond that which we expect and to anticipate Christ with us in the here and now even as we hope for the by and by. And may we catch of glimpse now and again of the world as God sees it.

Amen