

Matthew 25: Sorting

Today is known on the liturgical calendar as Christ the King or Reign of Christ Sunday. It is always the last Sunday of any church year. We begin a new church year and the Advent journey next week. Many times throughout the year we declare and celebrate the kingship of Christ. We especially like to celebrate the resurrection and ascension of the risen Jesus into heaven as part of this kingship. As we remember with our Sacrament of Communion the offering he made, we also anticipate a heavenly table at which we will dine as the guests of our Lord. After the message this morning we will again affirm our faith through the Apostles' Creed which includes our belief that Christ not only ascended into heaven, but sits on the right hand of God the Father. In that statement is the unstated affirmation that it is a throne upon which Christ sits and that from that position he rules all. The next affirmation found in the Apostles' Creed is that from this position at the Father's right hand, Christ will be pronouncing judgment upon all who have lived—both the quick and the dead. Our usual inclination is to avoid thinking about the judgment aspect implied in this creed or found in Hebrew Scriptures. We also tend to skim lightly over those passages in the gospels which seem to confirm the reality of judgment. Perhaps this is because we like to think of it as judgment between those who are good and those who are evil. And despite knowing that it is Christ who will do the judging, often we think we know just who might be the ones who are judged. Somehow only those who are evil pictured as standing in that heavenly courtroom. Using this image we are not particularly concerned because although we know that we sin, we aren't guilty of violating the big ones about murder or theft, for example, which make one evil. And we confess our sin about those lesser ones like coveting or lying, at least weekly through a prayer of confession. We repent and ask for the forgiveness found in God's mercy and the atonement offered through Jesus Christ. We don't really consider ourselves evil. We know we have shortcomings in our obedience to God's will, but feel we are covered by our repentance and efforts to do better and because God has claimed and redeemed us. Because we know we are not evil, we feel we have no reason to fear the judgment which will happen when Christ returns in glory—we will be invited to sit at Table with Christ in glory. We have recently been looking at some parables and teachings of Jesus given to the disciples just before his arrest—preparing them for his leaving them and warning them that because they are his disciples there are things they must do in the meantime, because it is certain he will return for an accounting. Into today's passage the message is much more direct. It clearly states it is about that judgment which will happen as the passage reveals "when the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him. Unlike the parables of Jesus, this teaching does not begin with a comparison to what the reign of God will be like. It is more an outline of what will happen—an outline of what will occur in order for the kingdom to be realized. This is not about a glimpse of the kingdom that is near but a description of the actualization of the rule of Christ in full. This is the gathering of the people at the entrance to God's kingdom, awaiting the opening of the gates so they can go in—the nations are gathered before him. As he is speaking to his disciples on the Mount of Olives, Jesus is very aware of how close Passover and his coming ordeal looms over him. Perhaps that is why this teaching moves from comparisons about what the kingdom will be like once God's rule is complete to a statement about the judgment which will occur before entrance is gained.

It is a statement which clarifies what those who are his do while he is absent—what happens in the meantime—the meantime which is where we live. This is a statement about the bar—the standard for this way of life. It is about what will happen when God’s righteousness and justice prevail. So although it follows parables which speak of the behavior for disciples in the meantime when the bridegroom has been delayed or the master has left on a journey, this is a straight forward description of the accounting which will be held. There were hints of judgment in the preceding parables as the unprepared were not admitted to the feast and the servant who just buried the talent he received had it taken from him. Yet here we have the image of Jesus sorting folks from all the nations—he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. There are other passages about sorting—the wheat from the chaff, good seed from bad, good fruit from bad, etc. Those are easy to visualize and understand the basis for the sorting. The clear basis for those separations is we equate one group as being desirable while the other is harmful. We might wonder at the image of sheep and goats being together in this passage, but that was a common first century practice. The need for separating them was real. Although the sheep and goats could and did graze together during the day they had to be separated over night. Sheep were hardier animals and could stay in the fields during cold nights while goats had to be sheltered. In comparison to the other images, both the sheep and the goats are valuable, but because of this difference they have to be sorted. Within Matthew’s gospel there is frequent tension generated between those who are obedient to God’s will and those who are not; often the one who is obedient exhibits behavior which is not that expected from the accepted standard of obedience. The one who is obedient to living according to God’s will as described by Jesus is often a surprise to the disciples and those around Jesus—for example, the Good Samaritan who acted as a neighbor when those expected to show compassion to a neighbor did not. When the people are separated in this parable, it seems that the basis for the separation is not exactly like that of the good from the evil. First, neither group is declared to be evil. There is no listing of “crimes” listed. Instead, the basis for the separation is how they have treated others. The ones identified as sheep are placed on the right while the ones identified as goats are placed on the left. As the sheep are invited to enter the kingdom prepared for them, they are told by the king: “for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” After this pronouncement about why they are receiving the blessing of the Father, it seems those who were declared righteous were perplexed and astounded for they did not understand. They did not remember ever seeing their king in need or doing the things for which the king blessed them. The king then tells them: “Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” When those on the left are addressed, those who have been declared goats, the pattern is much the same; except in the negative. They did not minister to the king when he appeared to them. And their response is the same. They do not remember ever seeing their king in need. And their response to this statement by their king is much the same—they say that they had never seen their king in need so they had not failed to provide food or drink or clothes, or shelter, etc. to their king. Again, they had failed to recognize the king in the least who were in need when they encountered them, so they are accursed and not allowed to enter

into the kingdom. In the passage from Ezekiel which I read, we again have the Lord speaking of the sorting of people using the shepherd and sheep metaphor. Here however, the image is of separating sheep from sheep—fat sheep from lean sheep. It seems the fat sheep have trampled, have butted at the weak until they have scattered that they will be judged. Those who have been scattered, those who have been mistreated will be gathered and fed by the Lord as their shepherd. In both passages God’s righteousness and justice, the standard by which judgment is made, involves how those who in Luke’s terminology are referred to as the least, the last and the lost. In this parable both groups seem surprised at their fate and were not aware whether they had either neglected or responded to “least of these”. This parable makes an ethical statement—that seems to be the basis of the separation. Some have looked at this passage in a light that makes it about works righteousness—those who acted with love and mercy receive eternal light. But before we trod that tempting path, we need to again picture that scene clearly—neither side knew what had determined where they stood before the final judgment sort was explained by the king. It confounded both. Those who met God’s standard of righteousness and justice acted out of their own understanding of obedience to the command to love—the widow, the orphan, the resident alien and even their enemies—to provide for their needs. Those who failed the test claimed ignorance, implicitly saying had they known such behavior was expected of them they would have provided it. The judgment proclaimed in this teaching has more to do with mercy than it does with works. Those who enter the kingdom have lived out their baptismal vows, not those who conscientiously performed good works or have been morally upright. This parable calls us to live the life of discipleship in obedience—an obedience rooted in joyful serving and mercy toward others without calculation about future rewards. We do a lot of sorting ourselves. We choose neighborhoods, churches and schools where people look like us, mostly act like us and don’t call into question our values and choices by their presence or perspective. If we get to know those “others”, then we have to acknowledge our prejudices as we see the humanity in the groups that we have sorted out of our own. But God doesn’t sort like that. God cares little about the differences we make fundamental and final, and far more about how we treat our fellow sheep, regardless of where they live or how they vote or even what they believe—remember the command about loving enemies. The question this Christ the King Sunday texts force us to ask is whether we are living under Christ’s reign and his commands, or our own. Who is doing the sorting in our lives, God or us? In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.