Christ the King, November 22, 2026 Pastor Chris Repp
Matthew 25:31-46; Ephesians 1:15-23 Grace Lutheran Church, Champaign, Illinois

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

Back in the early 1960s there was a famous experiment conducted at Yale University, now known as the obedience experiment. Participants in the experiment were instructed to operate a device that gave another person in the next room an electric shock whenever they answered a question incorrectly. With each subsequent wrong answer, they were instructed to increase the voltage. And they could hear that person in the next room react. They had been informed about the level that could potentially be dangerous, especially for a person with a preexisting heart condition. If a participant resisted giving more shocks, the person conducting the experiment would tell them that they really needed to continue for the sake of the experiment. Now, it turns out that both the experiment conductor and the person in the next room were actors, and no actual shocks were given. The point of the experiment was to see how far people would be willing to go in hurting another person just because an authority figure told them to. And the results, if you'll pardon the pun, were shocking. Some of the participants refused to continue at some point along the way, but 65%, almost two of every three, continued all the way through to the maximum voltage.

This experiment came to mind in the course of thinking about these end time texts that we've been struggling through here at the end of the church year. I have been wondering why we have traditionally been willing to accept the idea that Jesus at the end of the world will act in the ways the kings, masters, and bridegroom in these parables act. It's well known that such stern portrayals of Jesus were dominant in the Middle Ages and were part of what set Martin Luther off on his search for a merciful God. But Luther found that merciful God, and the Reformation was supposed to have changed that image for us. Luther brought the emphasis back to forgiveness and mercy, and much of Matthew's gospel that we've been reading through this year has been backing that up. Forgiveness is not supposed to be a limited resource. Jesus countered Peter's question about whether forgiving seven times was enough with a call to forgive seventy-seven times, or seventy times seven. Yet here we are toward the end of Matthew and we're supposed to accept that forgiveness is no longer an option? The foolish bridesmaids deserve to be locked out? The slave who buried his master's talent is rightly consigned to the outer darkness? And now in today's Gospel reading, the goats are consigned to eternal fire because they didn't see Christ in the least and so failed to help him. So, we are supposed to accept this now, on the final Sunday of the church year as the final word because Jesus seems to have said that this is how the judgment will go down, forgetting – as I have been pointing out for the last two weeks – that this is not the end of the story, that Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection are still to come in this Gospel and they should change our calculus about sin and punishment. But we don't push back, like many participants in the experiment didn't push back, because why? Are we afraid that questions like that would put us on the wrong side of the judge, that we might end up among the condemned for our temerity? Or is it maybe because we like a story with clear winners and losers, especially one that ends with the bad guys getting what's coming to them? Maybe the idea of good people like us ending up in heaven and all the wrong sorts of people, the people we don't like, ending up in hell just seems right. And maybe it absolves us of caring about those people even now. Because we know who the bad ones are, right? We know the sorts of people who deserve our help, and the sorts who don't. So we can be discriminating, and direct our efforts to the good guys.

I expect you will be wanting to push back against me now, at least in your mind. “Wait a minute, pastor,” you’re thinking, “we’re not *those* kinds of Christians. We’re the good kind. We’re the kind who love everybody, who don’t discriminate. We are alarmed at how immigrants and racial minorities and LGBTQ folks are being treated by the government these days and their Christian nationalist supporters. All are welcome in *this* place, don’t you know. We don’t judge. Well, except for those wrong kinds of Christians who are so unlike Jesus.” I hear your pushback, and today’s Gospel reading would seem to back you up. We know this story well, and we are determined to be the sheep. And we see so clearly how those other sorts of Christians are the goats.

Here’s the thing, though. The sheep and the goats in today’s reading hadn’t heard the story. They didn’t know that serving or not serving the least is serving or not serving Christ. But we do. That’s why we are determined to be the sheep, isn’t it? But ironically, we’re using goat calculus to make that decision. Because what did the goats say to the king? “When did we see you hungry or naked, or sick or imprisoned, and did not help you?” And what’s behind their question? If we had known that helping those least sorts of people was the same as helping you, well we definitely would have helped them! You see the problem, right? We can’t be the sheep that we want to be. Not this way. Not by learning the lesson of this story and deciding to be “Matthew 25 Christians.” Because we can’t unknow what we know. We can’t unlearn what we have learned from Matthew 25. The sheep didn’t know it was Christ they were helping. They weren’t looking for a reward, for their ticket into heaven. They were just being who they were, compassionate folks moved to action by the plight of their neighbors in dire straits. They couldn’t help but help.

So how *do* we become those kinds of people, the sheepy kind? If you’ve been here for the past couple of weeks you know where I’m going, right? I’m going where Matthew takes us next, to the cross. Because that is the place where *nobody* helped Jesus, where nobody objected or pushed back. Not the disciples, not the women, not the justice system, and, get this, not even God. “My God, my God,” Jesus calls out with his dying breath, “why have you forsaken me?” On the cross Jesus bears our sin, our failure, our goatishness, and even endures the silence of God in his darkest hour. All of that goes with him to die.

But that is not the end of the story. The end of the story comes in that glorious second reading from Ephesians. God was not silent forever. God was at work behind the scenes in and through Jesus’ death, and on the third day raised him from the dead. Jesus’ story continues, and so does ours. Baptized into his death and resurrection, we get connected by faith to the power of God that raised Jesus from death to life. And this power goes to work on our hearts. I love how this is expressed in our Ephesians text, don’t you? “With the eyes of our hearts enlightened, we perceive the hope to which he has called us.” Our hearts have eyes that get opened to hope. Death and Hell and fire and outer darkness and the fear they inspire do not finally hold sway. Their power is limited and temporary. The eyes of our hearts see Jesus now elevated to God’s right hand, and all the powers of this world, the powers that rebel against God and that draw us from God, all those powers are now under his feet. We are liberated from their power and influence. This is how goats get turned into sheep, by hope in the real end of God’s story, and in the real power of God that is directed not to death, but through death to life. It’s a lifelong process, and we are always in this life both goat and sheep at the same time. But sheep is what God is now making us by the power of Jesus’ resurrected life. That’s how we get to be the sheep in this story, the kind of people who care for others and the world God loves just because that’s the kind of people we are, by the grace of God and the work of the Holy Spirit. May it be so. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting.