

November 26, 2023

The Last Sunday after Pentecost: The Feast of Christ the King
St. Stephen's, Catlett; St. Andrew's, Ada
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Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

Psalm 100

Ephesians 1:15-23

Matthew 25:31-46

Thanksgiving has come and gone, and that can mean only one thing. “He’s making a list, checking it twice, gonna find out who’s naughty or nice.” Today we’re not talking about Santa; we’re talking about God. There’s no getting around Matthew’s Gospel where the list will put us either with the sheep or with the goats. And let’s face it, does anyone among us seriously think they’re going to end up with the sheep? Not if the list has anything to do with it. Of course we’ve all done some decent things in our lifetimes, but doesn’t the bad stuff we’ve done outweigh the good stuff? (Or am I the only one?) Now you may think that I’m just being cute, that really, no one is keeping a list. Wrong. Matthew knows there’s a list, and he’s not the only one. Paul also knows there’s a list. He talks about it in his letter to the Colossians and says that the list includes everything we’ve ever done, and, because it’s God’s list, it also has everything we will ever do in the future. Not only that, but every sin has a punishment attached to it. Scary stuff. God’s making a list and checking it twice. Except that’s not what God is doing at all. Sure, God made the list and included all the punishments, but then, in God’s eternal love for each one of us, and in Paul’s own words, “God set that list aside and nailed it to the Cross” (Colossians 2:14). In fact, that’s what the Cross is for: it holds the list that God never wants to see again.

But what about those sheep and goats? On the surface, it sounds like the good guys – the sheep – have earned their way into Heaven by their good deeds and that the bad guys – the goats – have earned their way into hell. But the surface is misleading. Did you hear words like “earn” or “deserve” anywhere in today’s Gospel? They’re not there. The sheep don’t earn, they inherit. If they earned it, it wouldn’t be a free gift. Inheritance is the gift of one life’s worth to another, unearned and often undeserved. The good guys in today’s Gospel were surprised at their inheritance. They were just doing what you and I do every day: living their lives quietly and decently, doing what they could for the people around them. We’ve been doing the same thing, and it was all for God, the whole time! Who knew?

As for the goats? The truth is, I don’t hang out with goats, so I don’t know the first thing about them. And I know it’s not my job to worry about them; God does a way better job at that than I do. The passage we heard from the prophet Ezekiel doesn’t mention goats at all; it’s all about the sheep. God knows we haven’t always had it easy, but God has always been – and always be will – present for us. The trick, it seems to me, is to be the most decent sheep we can be without worrying about goats, foxes, tarantulas, or anything else. Psalm 100 tells us that we are the sheep of God’s pasture. We always have been, we are today, and we always will be. That’s enough. It says that God’s mercy is everlasting and that God’s faithfulness endures from age to age. It’s hard enough being a sheep without also having to worry about what the goats are doing in the next pasture.

We may not be the best sheep in the flock, but we’re God’s sheep, and nothing can or will ever change that. The seal of the Holy Spirit in Baptism that marks us as Christ’s own forever is all we need to remember when we hear Matthew going off about sheep and goats, saints and sinners, weeds and wheat. We do good stuff in our lives not so that we will one day earn Heaven, but because it’s what God’s own sheep in the world are here to do. It’s what we do because it’s who we are.