

Sermon  
The Last Sunday After Pentecost: The Reign of Christ  
November 26, 2023

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Readings: EZEKIEL 34:11-16, 20-24; PSALM 100; EPHESIANS 1:15-23; MATTHEW 25:31-46

If you're unfamiliar with the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats and you get to the pearly gates, get in the line marked "sheep". Author Amy Jill Levine offers this tongue in cheek advice in her book about the parables.<sup>1</sup>

If only it were that easy! If only this was a checklist: find one hungry person, one thirsty person, one sick person, and one person in prison, and done, through the pearly gates...

I think we all know that this either-or/in-out/checklist approach isn't what Jesus was all about...

Today is the last Sunday of the church year: the Last Sunday After Pentecost, when we celebrate the Reign of Christ. This was originally a Roman Catholic Feast Day known as the Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe. It can be traced back to 1925, and its purpose was to acknowledge Jesus Christ as the "King of all kings" and as a way to bring God back into a secular world.

For many of us – myself included – this "King of all kings" imagery is challenging. I find it challenging in the same way I am challenged by the sheep and the goats. The right side, *or* the left – and clearly "wrong" – side. Judgement and eternal punishment *or* salvation. You're with the King of kings *or* you're not. For many of us this judgement and eternal punishment just doesn't fit with our theology. It doesn't fit with believing in a God of love and compassion.

Last week I talked about parables being living things and I quoted Lutheran pastor and author Nadia Bolz-Weber, who says that dissecting parables – looking for hidden meaning that is static and unchanging – is like performing an autopsy on someone. We might see some sort of mechanical meaning, but in doing so, we prevent that living thing from ever changing us, again.

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<sup>1</sup> Levine, Amy Jill. "Short Stories By Jesus", Kindle Edition.

Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us that the Bible isn't a book with the answers at the back. So, what are we to do with these stories? What are we to do with imagery of kings and the Reign of Christ?

Parker Palmer writes and speaks about the "tragic gap". He says that Christianity requires us to stand in the tragic gap. On one side of the gap we look at the hard realities around us – poverty, anger, hatred, greed, despair we see all of that, everywhere. We see hungry and thirsty people everywhere. We watch it on TV, on social media. On the other side of where we're standing are those things we know to be possible, not because we wish they were true, but because we've seen them with our own eyes. We've seen greed, but we've also seen generosity. We've seen rampant and competitive individualism, but we've also seen collaboration and community. What we need to do to "stay in the action" is to stand in the tragic gap without flipping onto one side or the other: too much of the hard realities and we become cynical. Too much of the other side and you're into irrelevant idealism. These two sides sound very different, but they're actually the same. They take us out of the action, and leave us doing nothing.<sup>2</sup>

Parker Palmer also talks about two kinds of tension. There's destructive tension, and creative tension. Destructive tension shatters our heart into a million pieces. We're out of the action because we're too busy crawling around on the floor picking up the pieces and trying to put our heart back together. Creative tension breaks open our hearts into greater capacity to hold both the joy and the suffering that come with being human. A willingness to stand in the tragic gap puts us in a place where our hearts can be broken open.

This week's parable, and all the parables, have the potential to break open our hearts. If part of acknowledging and celebrating the Reign of Christ is about relevance in the secular world: hearts, not shattered by the harsh realities of the world, nor trapped in idealism, but rather broken open is surely part of that relevance.

Today's parable, the Reign of Christ, and the "tragic gap": it's all about how we see the world, and about how we invite others to see it.

Notice that neither the sheep nor the goats knew what they'd done. The sheep hadn't noticed Jesus any more than the goats. Noticing this moves us away from a checklist, into an opportunity to see things differently.

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<sup>2</sup> "Standing in the Tragic Gap"; film accessed on ["The Work of the People"](#).

Jesus doesn't stop with either-or. Whenever we are faced with a dilemma – with contradiction, with paradox – we, as followers of Jesus, have to hold the moment, and if we do, we'll find a third way. You have to feel the tension in the dilemma to move beyond that either-or into a third way. It's this tension, and a willingness to stand in it, to feel it stretch us and challenge us, that breaks open our hearts.<sup>3</sup>

In that same podcast episode I've mentioned more than once now – The One You Feed, a conversation with host Eric Zimmer and Richard Rohr – Richard Rohr talks about the “Middle Way” not as being about balancing opposites, but about holding both. He sees this in the cross: Jesus was willing to hold it all. He is holding all the opposites, not balancing them out. He doesn't balance it, he suffers it. It stretches him, and he holds it all until it transforms him, and we call this Resurrection.

Barbara Brown Taylor says this:

”Charity is no substitute for kinship. We are not called to be philanthropists or social workers, but [siblings]. We are called into relationship, even when that relationship is unlikely, momentary, or sad. We are called to look at each other and see Christ, who promises to be there where our eyes meet, and in that glance to teach us something thing we need to know.<sup>4</sup>

We are called into relationship, even when that relationship seems unlikely. We are drawn into relationship, and we are called to pause when those relationships create dilemmas. We're called to pause, and to trust that God is with us, offering us a way between. A way that may challenge us, but that also has the potential to transform us – to break open our hearts – if we let it.

Bring this third way into what this parable of sheep and goats tells us, and the call to feed the hungry, offer drink to the thirsty, to clothe the naked and visit the prisoner is not about the dilemma between dropping a coin in the panhandler's cup or not.

It's about pausing in that moment of apparent dilemma. It's about stopping and looking into the eyes of that panhandler and greeting them with an open mind and an open heart. If we do that, it's not going to end up being about the coin the cup: it just might be about something much, much more. It'll be about transformation on both sides.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> 4 Barbara Brown Taylor. *The Preaching Life* (Kindle Locations 1628-1630). Kindle Edition.

If The Reign of Christ is still about the relevance of God or the Church in a secular world, we have to move away from messages about sheep and goats as a way of convincing ourselves and others of who's in and who's out, who is with the King of kings and who is not.

We can be "in the action" as Parker Palmer describes it, if we make it not about which line we're in at the pearly gates, but about the tragic gap – about the third way, the "Middle Way", Jesus's way – between apparent dilemmas in ourselves and in our world. May we find that way, together, here at Ascension, and in our own hearts. May our hearts be broken open, and may we break open hearts, today, and every day. In Jesus name. Amen.