

The Lessons Appointed for Use on the

Last Sunday after Pentecost

Christ the King

Year A

RCL

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

Psalms 100

Matthew 25:31-46



The Collect

Almighty and everlasting God, whose will it is to restore all things in your well-beloved Son, the King of kings and Lord of lords: Mercifully grant that the peoples of the earth, divided and enslaved by sin, may be freed and brought together under his most gracious rule; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

Thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Be-

cause you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep.

I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken.

Psalm 100 Page 729, BCP

Jubilate Deo

- 1 Be joyful in the LORD, all you lands;
 serve the LORD with gladness
 and come before his presence with a song.
- 2 Know this: The LORD himself is God;
 he himself has made us, and we are his;
 we are his people and the sheep of his pasture.
- 3 Enter his gates with thanksgiving;
 go into his courts with praise;
 give thanks to him and call upon his Name.
- 4 For the LORD is good;
 his mercy is everlasting;
 and his faithfulness endures from age to age.

Matthew 25:31-46

Jesus said, “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 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.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’

Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

SERMON

You may have noticed that I rarely speak to you about the devil. That's on purpose, because I don't think the concept of the devil is very helpful in our path to serving God. There seems to be enough pure meanness in people generally to explain everything I might need a devil to explain.

Ross Douthat, writing about the Penn State scandal for the New York Times said:

Bad and mediocre people are tempted to sin by their own habitual weaknesses. The earlier lies or thefts or adulteries make the next one that much easier to contemplate. Having already cut so many corners, the thinking goes, what's one more here or there? Why even aspire to virtues that you probably won't achieve, when it's easier to remain the sinner that you already know yourself to be?

But good people, heroic people, are led into temptation by their very goodness — by the il-

lusion, common to those who have done important deeds, that they have higher responsibilities than the ordinary run of humankind. It's precisely in the service to these supposed higher responsibilities that they often let more basic ones slip away.

I think Ross is just right about that. I don't need a devil to explain distressing events. I don't even need evil people. All I need are human beings that can convince themselves that they are serving a higher good — the Penn State athletic department in this case — and who believe that defense of that higher good requires actions no one would otherwise countenance. The Crusaders who swept into Jerusalem and made the streets run deep with Muslim blood, the wingnuts that flew airplanes into the Twin Towers, the Inquisition that burned Jews alive who would not submit to baptism — all these people thought their duty was to do awful things in the

name of the God of love.

The way the devil is usually thought about around here seems to me wrong-headed and misleading as well. We tend to see the devil through the lens of UK Ball. On this side, we have God and His forces. On that side we have the devil and his legions. The whistle blows, there's a tip-off, and the battle is joined for possession of all creation and the souls therein. Nonsense! God's Creation isn't up for grabs. It's God's. That dog just won't hunt. We don't understand a good God and a bad God, locked in battle one with the other. There is only one God. Period.

But the main reason that I don't speak about the devil very much is because as soon as we introduce the possibility of two teams, our natural human tendency is to imagine that we can discern who is on whose side. We see someone in the dock at court, and from some nasty

place down deep the thought bubbles up that this is a child of Satan. The next thought is one of celebration that you are not a child of Satan. With that thought, you just walked off the end of the dock, for we aren't that smart.

I spent a lifetime up to my double chins in criminals. My conclusion? For the most part, they aren't dumb because they're criminals. They're criminals because they're dumb. They're excluded from productive society. They can't figure out how to make a life with the skills they have because the society in which they live doesn't value the limited skill set they have. They're dumb enough to become addicted, then have insufficient resources to get out of the trap they set for themselves. Some actually do make a turn-around in jail, but come out to find that no one will hire them with a felony record, and no one will house them for the same reason

and their choices are to live under a bridge someplace or return to theft to feed themselves.

As you see, my years in the criminal courts left me more sympathetic to offenders than you would think. Experience will do that to you. I can't see them anymore as just "the bad guys" or "children of the devil". You could even say I feel compassion for them. I'm thinking here of one young man in particular who you would see as a petty criminal leading an aimless, drug-fueled existence. I see him as I first met him, as a young boy who was horribly, brutally abused by people he was supposed to be able to trust. That abuse put out the light of hope in his eyes, leading him to blunder now through darkness devoid of hope or trust or compassion.

Of course, I like to think that I'm not a complete idiot, that my eyes aren't totally clouded. I did meet people in the courts who were really, truly scary. Those are

the people that posed the greatest problem for my Pollyanna-ish view of God's children. If all babies born are children of God, how come some of them go so very wrong? Are we really stuck with the idea of children of God and children of Satan?

Some of my cop friends do joke that they can tell the good guys from the bad guys even in the neonatal department. They claim that if they rack a Remington shotgun around the babies, the future criminals jump up from their cribs and put their little hands against the wall. Is that **really** where we are?

Those who study systematic theology call this “double predestination”. Some people are doomed from birth to hell, some are blessed from birth to heaven. That's not a very happy sort of theology if you ask me, and it brings up another topic I don't talk about often – heaven and hell.

I don't speak to you much about heaven and hell because I think we have quite enough to busy ourselves with in God's service right here where we are now. Worrying yourself bald-headed over heaven and hell is an excellent way to stop serving God's Creation with compassion, and to start turning all of religion into a self-centered search for what's best for you. It ain't about you, church. It's about God.

Heaven and hell. The works of the devil. The really **big** things that the TV preachers like to talk about don't interest me much. Then, once or twice a year, the Revised Common Lectionary paints me into a corner with passages such as we have today. Ezekiel speaks for God and says

I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep.

Jesus is even more graphic when he tells his disciples

Jesus said, “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; . . . Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for

the devil and his angels; . . . And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

So, how does your soft-headed pastor get around that?

If we reject the notion that some babies are born to be damned, what goes wrong between cuddly baby and mug shot? What is added or taken away? This is church, so I want to say love, but we’ve beat that poor word to pieces. We speak of loving our children, loving Kathy’s bread pudding, and loving a TV show with the same word, so it gets fuzzed up. I want to use a different word: compassion – a feeling of deep sympathy and sorrow for another who is stricken by misfortune, accompanied by a strong desire to alleviate the suffering. I am convinced that our souls grow and mature, nurtured by the giving and receiving of compassion. Without that es-

sential nutrient, Vitamin C, our souls shrivel to something unrecognizable.

We may have allowed the word “love” to become fuzzed up, but compassion is different. Compassion is a physical sensation we have all experienced. We’re outside, the kids are riding their bikes, and one of them, traveling at a good speed, falls, slamming against the blacktop and gravels, spinning to a stop, the rough surface scraping deep into his little hands and bare arms. Every last one of us here know the sensation of watching that. You can feel it in your own arms and hands and you run to alleviate the suffering before you even think about it. **THAT** is compassion – a feeling of deep sympathy and sorrow for another who is stricken by misfortune, accompanied by a strong desire to alleviate the suffering.

Compassion means to suffer with another. We learn

it from our parents, who suffer with us when we hurt. We gift it to our children, and those around us, when we act on a strong desire to alleviate the sufferings of others, not because it's a good thing to do, or because it will win us brownie points in heaven, but because we share that suffering and act to repair what was damaged just as if it had happened to us. With each act of giving or receiving compassion, our souls grow and we become connected one with the other as a family.

A lack of compassion explains what happened at Penn State because organizations cannot feel compassion. Organizations, corporations, basketball programs all can do charitable things, but they do them as part of their corporate activities, not because they feel compassion. Corporations cannot feel anything. When Mike McQueary walked in on Jerry Sandusky raping a boy, he reported it to the coach and to the police. The coach

reported to his superior and then what happened? It was swept under the carpet to protect the athletic program and the University. If you doubt that, I respectfully disagree. My stint as a campus police officer showed me the lengths a university will go to protect its athletic department.

Ross Douthat continued in his piece for the New York Times, touching on the repeated scandals that have touched the Roman Catholic Church:

I also believe that most of the clerics who covered up abuse in my own Catholic Church were in many ways good men. Of course there were wicked ones as well — bishops in love with their own prerogatives, priests for whom the ministry was about self-aggrandizement rather than service. But there were more who had given their lives to their fellow believers, sacrificing the possibility of family and fortune in order to say Mass and hear confessions, to steward hospitals and charities, to visit the sick and

comfort the dying.

They believed in their church. They believed in their mission. And out of the temptation that comes only to the virtuous, they somehow persuaded themselves that protecting their institution's various good works mattered more than justice for the children they were supposed to shepherd and protect.

When we center our lives on the protection and well-being of an organization so that we come to believe that the good of the organization is our most sacred responsibility, we have walked off the end of the dock. It's precisely in the service to these supposed higher responsibilities that we often let more basic responsibilities slip away.

On the other hand, if we place at the center of our lives the teachings, life and death of Jesus, we grant ourselves a life centered on compassion. Our souls are nourished when we experience a feeling of deep sympa-

thy and sorrow for another who is stricken by misfortune, accompanied by a strong desire to alleviate the suffering. The Buddhist tradition has a story.

A master and his disciple were walking along when they saw a blind beggar on the side of the road. “Give him an alm”, the master instructed his disciple. When the disciple returned, the master chided him.

“You didn't tip your hat”, he said.

“But the man is blind”, replied the disciple.

“You never can tell”, replied the master, “he might be a fraud.”

The giving of the alm accomplished two purposes. It alleviated the suffering of the beggar and it nourished the soul of the giver and that is so even if the beggar is a fraud.

We live in a world strangely like the First Century world in which Jesus walked. In that time, the Roman

government ruled the lives of all in Judea. They did so without compassion, for organizations cannot experience compassion. All they can do is to fulfill their own ends.

In our time, all of humanity is in thrall to one corporation or another, and these organizations similarly cannot experience compassion. Inevitably, some, like the bishops who transferred pedophile priests rather than expose them, like those at the Penn State who reacted to an eyewitness account of an unmentionable act by banning the offender from the showers, will come to place the good of the institution at the center of their lives. A soul without compassion at its center will shrivel and die.

Who are those who are blessed by the Father, who will inherit the kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world? Jesus tells us that they are

those who saw Him hungry and you gave him food, who saw him thirsty and you gave Him something to drink, who welcomed Him though He was a stranger, who clothed Him when He was naked, who cared for Him when He was sick, and visited with Him when He was in prison — those who showed compassion for the suffering of others and a deep commitment to end the suffering.

And who are those on the left hand, those that are accursed, who are sent into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels? Are they not those who substituted greed and self-interest for compassion, those who pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with their horns until they scattered them far and wide?

Don't allow yourself an unhealthy fascination with devils, church. Don't worry yourself about heaven and

hell. You have enough to do here. Instead, ask yourself, “When it is my time to go, will those with whom I’ve come into contact say that I touched them with compassion? Did I alleviate suffering? Did I truly suffer with those who suffer? Was God’s creation healed by my passing through it?”

AMEN

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