

**Christ the King Sunday
November 26, 2023**

Sermon by Rev. Jerry LiaBraaten and Rev. Renee LiaBraaten

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit. Amen.**

USHERING IN THE KINGDOM

Just one question for you today...and it's an easy one. How many of you enjoy going to the theater? That's great because today I want you to imagine you're at the theater and the setting is, well lets just say, celestial...

"Where on earth am I?"

"WELL, (chuckling) YOU'RE NOT ON EARTH, MY DEAR."

"Who are you?"

"ME? I'M A CHERUBIM."

"A real cherubim?"

"YES...ONE OF THOSE ANGELS WHO SERVE AT THE THRONE OF GOD."

"Wait a minute...If I'm not on earth and you're a cherubim...does that mean that I'm dead?"

"WELL...YES."

"But...when did I die? How did I die?"

"NOW...NOW...NOW. JUST RELAX. THAT REALLY DOESN'T MATTER."

"Well, what happens next?"

"IN A FEW MOMENTS YOU WILL GET TO MEET GOD FACE TO FACE...AND TALK ABOUT YOUR LIFE."

"No! I'm not ready to do that. I'm afraid to do that!"

"AFRAID! WHY?"

"Because...I might be...a goat."

"A WHAT?"

"A goat! The Bible says that at the end of time, Jesus is going to separate the sheep and the goats and I don't know if I'm a sheep or a goat!"

"WELL, I CAN CLEAR THAT UP FOR YOU RIGHT NOW."

"You can?"

"YES...YOU ARE A SHEEP..."

Big sigh of relief.

"**AND** A GOAT."

"What?"

"THERE WERE TIMES IN YOUR LIFE WHEN YOU WERE VERY COMPASSIONATE...WHEN YOU WERE RESPONSIVE TO HUMAN NEED ...WHEN YOU SPONTANEOUSLY GAVE OF YOURSELF FOR THE SAKE OF SOMEONE ELSE.

BUT THERE WERE OTHER TIMES WHEN YOU CHOSE NOT TO RESPOND TO THE NEEDS OF THOSE AROUND YOU. THERE WERE TIMES WHEN GOD NEEDED YOU TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE AND YOU SIMPLY CHOSE NOT TO GET INVOLVED.

SO YOU SEE, SOMETIMES YOU BEHAVED LIKE A SHEEP...AND OTHER TIMES LIKE A GOAT."

"But if I'm a sheep **and** a goat...what's going to happen to me now? Am I going to be sent to PURGATORY?"

"PURGATORY! RENEE, YOU'RE A LUTHERAN! YOU DON'T BELIEVE IN PURGATORY!"

"I know...but you never really know about these sorts of things."

"AND... WEREN'T YOU A LUTHERAN **PASTOR** ON EARTH?"

"Yes."

"EVER HEAR OF MARTIN LUTHER?"

“Of course, I’ve heard of Martin Luther!”

“REMEMBER HOW HE TAUGHT ‘SIMUL USTES ET PECCATOR’?”

“Yes, he taught that humans are at the same time ‘saints and sinners.’”

“IN ESSENCE, THIS PARABLE IS SAYING THE SAME THING...SHEEP AND GOATS.”

“Oh.”

“AND WEREN’T YOU ALWAYS PREACHING THAT PEOPLE ARE SAVED BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH...AND NOT BY THEIR WORKS?”

“Yes.”

“DON’T YOU BELIEVE WHAT YOU PREACHED?”

“Yes. I absolutely believe it.”

“THEN WHY ARE YOU WORRIED? WHAT YOU CALL YOUR “ETERNAL SALVATION” (WHICH I CALL “YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD”) IS NOT IN QUESTION. YOU’VE ALREADY BEEN SEALED WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT AND MARKED WITH THE CROSS OF CHRIST FOREVER.”

“But it says in the Bible that the sheep--the righteous--are going to inherit the kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world...and that the goats--the accursed--are going to depart into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”

“RENEE, THERE ARE NO SHEEP--NO RIGHTEOUS--THERE ARE ONLY PEOPLE...PEOPLE WHO ARE **MADE** RIGHTEOUS THROUGH GOD’S GRACE.”

DO YOU REALIZE THAT IF YOU FOLLOW YOUR LINE OF THINKING IT WOULD MEAN THAT PEOPLE COULD BE SAVED BY THEIR CHARITABLE ACTS?

IT APPEARS YOU MIGHT HAVE MISSED THE POINT OF THIS PARABLE.”

“What IS the point?”

“THIS PARABLE IS ABOUT A KINGDOM THAT IS NOT OF THE EARTH. AS CHRIST SAID, ‘MY KINGDOM IS NOT OF THIS WORLD.’ IT USES THE METAPHOR OF A KINGDOM WHERE CHRIST REIGNS AS KING, WHICH MEANS THE LAWS AND STANDARDS AND VALUES OF THIS KINGDOM ARE MUCH DIFFERENT THAN THOSE OF THE KINGDOMS OF THE WORLD.

IN THIS KINGDOM THE KING IDENTIFIES SO CLOSELY WITH HIS SUBJECTS THAT WHATEVER HAPPENS TO ANY OF THEM--EVEN TO THE VERY LEAST AMONG THEM--IT IS AS IF IT HAPPENS TO THE KING HIMSELF.

IN FACT, THIS KING LOVES HIS SUBJECTS SO MUCH THAT HE WILL DO ANYTHING FOR THEM...EVEN DIE FOR THEM. THIS IS A KINGDOM MARKED BY PEACE AND JUSTICE AND GOVERNED BY GRACE. IN RESPONSE TO THAT GRACE, THE HIGHEST HUMAN CALLING IS TO LIVE A LIFE OF LOVE AND COMPASSION."

"But how does a human like me get into this kingdom?"

"RENEE, YOU DON'T '**GET INTO**' THIS KINGDOM. YOU '**WORK FOR**' THIS KINGDOM. ALTHOUGH THIS KINGDOM IS NOT **OF** THE WORLD, IT EXISTS **IN** THE WORLD AMONG AND THROUGH THOSE WHO FOLLOW THE WAYS OF CHRIST.

THE HOLY SPIRIT WORKS THROUGH THE HEARTS AND MINDS OF THE FOLLOWERS OF CHRIST...BREAKING INTO THE FEAR AND DESPAIR OF EARTHLY LIFE...AND BRINGING NEW LIFE!

THE HUNGRY ARE FED...THE STRANGERS, WELCOMED...THE NAKED, CLOTHED...THE SICK, CARED FOR...THE PRISONERS, VISITED. THESE ARE ALL SIGNS OF CHRIST'S KINGDOM BREAKING INTO THE WORLD!"

"So, all those times when I prayed the Lord's Prayer and said, 'Thy kingdom come,' God was wanting me to get involved and help this kingdom come into the world?"

"ABSOLUTELY! YOU SEE...THAT IS THE CHOICE EVERY HUMAN MAKES...WHICH KINGDOM WILL THEY WORK FOR...WHICH KING WILL THEY SERVE?"

"I think I'm catching on to the point of the parable..."

"GREAT! THAT MEANS YOU'RE READY FOR ANOTHER POINT...ONE THAT IS OFTEN OVERLOOKED.

NOTICE THAT JESUS SAYS IT IS THE **NATIONS** OF THE WORLD THAT ARE GATHERED BEFORE CHRIST, NOT **INDIVIDUAL PEOPLE**. IN OTHER WORDS, THE SHEEP AND THE GOATS ARE JUDGED COLLECTIVELY. NOTICE IN THE PARABLE THAT THE RESPONSE IS NOT, 'WHEN DID I SEE YOU HUNGRY?' BUT 'WHEN DID **WE** SEE YOU HUNGRY?'"

"So, you're saying that even though our relationship with God is intensely personal, this parable is more about the 'communal' aspect of our faith?"

"YES...IN FACT, WHAT YOU MIGHT CALL THE PRIVATIZATION OF FAITH ACTUALLY UNDERMINES THE POWER OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE. CHRIST'S FOLLOWERS EXIST NOT IN ISOLATION FROM THE WORLD, BUT ARE CALLED TO BE DEEPLY ENGAGED IN IT...FOR THE SAKE OF THE WORLD.

MOST HUMANS FEEL A SENSE OF GUILT WHEN THEY HURT SOMEONE, ESPECIALLY A FAMILY MEMBER OR NEIGHBOR OR FRIEND. BUT TOO OFTEN THEY ARE NOT SENSITIVE TO THEIR PARTICIPATION IN SIN ON A LARGER SCALE.”

“What do you mean?”

“BY FOCUSING ON THEIR PERSONAL PIETY, HUMANS OFTEN DISMISS THEMSELVES FROM ANY COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY OR GUILT. YET MANY INJUSTICES INFLICTED ON PEOPLE ARE NOT THE FAULT OF ANY ONE PERSON BUT OF A SOCIETY, SYSTEM OR NATION THAT ALLOWS IT TO HAPPEN AND PERPETUATES IT.

THOSE WHO FOLLOW CHRIST ARE CALLED TO RECOGNIZE THEIR COLLECTIVE ROLE IN SOCIETAL FAILURES.”

“So, you’re saying we need to pay attention to how our personal decisions in daily life may lead to unjust consequences for others.”

“YES...THIS PARABLE IS ABOUT A KINGDOM MARKED BY COMPASSION, A COMPASSION THAT MOTIVATES HUMANS TO CARE ABOUT BOTH INDIVIDUALS AND ALSO GROUPS OF MARGINALIZED, HURTING PEOPLE...AND THE EARTH ITSELF. AND TO CARE IN MORE THAN SENTIMENTAL, SUPERFICIAL AND TOKEN WAYS.”

“Hmmm...I sure wish I wasn’t dead. There’s a lot I would have done differently.”

“WELL IN THAT CASE, I’VE GOT GOOD NEWS FOR YOU...YOU’RE NOT DEAD. YOU’RE JUST SLEEPING.”

“Yes, I know. I’ve read where the Bible describes death as ‘falling asleep.’”

“NO, MY DEAR, YOU REALLY ARE SLEEPING. LITERALLY! THIS IS JUST A DREAM.”

“What?”

“IT’S ACTUALLY 3:00 A.M. ON SUNDAY MORNING.”

“I’m not dead?”

“NOPE! YOU’RE SLEEPING...BUT IT IS TIME FOR YOU TO WAKE UP!”

“Well actually, if I’m really just sleeping sleeping, then I don’t need to wake up until 6:00!”

“NO. YOU NEED TO WAKE UP NOW. YOU HAVE A LOT OF WORK TO DO ON YOUR SERMON.”

“You’re right. But what should I say?”

“REMIND THE PEOPLE AT ST. CYPRIANS AND ALL THOSE LISTENING ONLINE THAT THIS PARABLE IS NOT ABOUT **GETTING INTO** THE KINGDOM. IT’S ABOUT **USHERING IN** THE KINGDOM.”

“Ushering in the kingdom...hmm. (long pause) That would make a great title! You're right. It’s time for me to wake up. In fact, it’s time for **all of us to wake up!**”

“NOW THAT WILL PREACH!”

Together: **“Amen!”**