

November 20, 2011  
Christ the King Sunday

Ezekiel 34: 11-16, 20-24  
Matthew 25: 31-46

### **“Our Final Checkup for 2011”**

Every year I make an appointment with my internist for an annual checkup. We are all familiar with the routine. I'll get blood drawn to check the numbers on sugar, cholesterol, iron and so on. At least every two years I'll get a chest x-ray. The doctor will come in and ask some fundamental questions, listen to my heart and lungs, check the numbers on my blood pressure, and recommend any vaccinations that need updating. This is my annual physical; my annual checkup.

Matthew's parable of the sheep and the goats makes me think of our need for an annual spiritual, if not more frequent; an annual spiritual checkup. When we read Matthew's description of the Last Judgment, we realize we are being given a glimpse into the future. Matthew has painted for us a picture of the final Day of Judgment, that pivotal point in God's time when, with all power and authority given to the Messiah, Christ our King, will reconcile the ledgers of all life on earth, and the Kingdom of Heaven will be established in the fullness of all its glory. Though Matthew does not say this directly, we are led to believe that on that coming Day of the Lord on which the Reign of Christ is ushered in, will be a day when all eyes will see and know the truth of what God has and is creating. All eyes will see that indeed, Christ is King ... the judge of all nations, of all people and of all creation.

I have to admit that I shudder when I read Matthew's account of the Day of Judgment. And even as I am beginning to like much better Ezekiel's description of that coming day when God will gather all his sheep unto himself and establish His Kingdom in its fullness, even Ezekiel sends the discomfoting message that we will all be called to account for our lives and ourselves in this world in the heavenly courtroom of the King. As we begin reading along in our lesson from Ezekiel, we are comforted by these words from the prophet:

“For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land.

...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, ...”

...this is all good and fine, and then Ezekiel jabs us in a way that gives us pause:

“...but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.” (Ezekiel 35:11ff – excerpted)

Well, I know I could stand to lose a few pounds. Compared to the rest of the world, I certainly have more than my share. Matthew and Ezekiel were men of like mindedness. God’s faithful and obedient sheep will be blessed, but those who have turned away and have followed after the desires of their own hearts, the goats I suppose we would say, will pay a dear price. Now I’m just telling you what I hear these faithful men of God telling us. It is a message that, as I said, unnerves me and gives me pause to consider the need for an annual spiritual checkup. It is frightful to think of what happens to the goats!

On most days I feel pretty good about my faith, about my relationship with God, and my relationships with most people I know. And as I ask myself how I am doing on this day of lifting up the needs and the concerns of the Help Center, ...this day of Dedicating of our time, our talents, and our material resources to the work of the church, ...in this week of Thanksgiving when I know I will eat more than I should, and more than most of the world’s people eat in a week, ...I am thinking, especially in the light of this parable of the sheep and the goats, that there is a very good likelihood that some of my annual checkup numbers are off.

This past week, I had two very needy people come to me and ask for food and lodging. As you have heard me say before, this is a regular occurrence, especially for us here at the church. Peggy and I agonize over these situations, doing our best to measure between what we can do, ...what we should do, ...what goes beyond reason. This is the same thing that goes on at the Help Center every day it is open. The need is so severe that a Subway sandwich and directions to the Salvation Army, or the Help Center, just lead me to pray in exasperation: “Lord God, help us,” realizing that if Matthew is right, I have very likely pulled up short one more time.

Sometimes I just want to skip over this parable. I prefer to think of our Lord Jesus as loving, merciful, forgiving, all those things we know He is. But what will the day of clouds and thick darkness, the Day of Judgment be like? Tom Long, the commentator on the Gospel of Matthew I like best, suggests most interestingly that it could be said

that the whole Gospel of Matthew has been moving toward and preparing us for this dramatic parable. (Long, Thomas G. Matthew. Westminster Bible Companion, pg. 283.) In Matthew, “Jesus is the great teacher and this parable is his last formal act of teaching, the final point, the parting lesson, the cumulative moment in his teaching ministry.” (Long, pg. 283-284) The parable is a victory hymn. It is set in the future. “When the Son of Man comes in his glory ...” and our risen Lord is fully established as the King of kings, the Judge of judges.

- Jesus, who had “nowhere to lay his head” is now seated on the royal throne as King.
- Jesus, who was accused of being an agent of Satan is now revealed as the holy Lord of lords.
- Jesus, who was rejected even by his hometown, is now exalted as the judge of the whole human family.
- Jesus, who resisted the devil’s temptation to throw himself down from the temple and let God’s angels take charge of him, is now elevated in glory above all earthly temples and is in command of the angels. (Long, pg. 284)

Every time we interpret a parable, we need to ask ourselves (at least) two questions: 1) What does this parable tell us about God? And, 2) What does this parable tell us about ourselves? In the story, all the nations of the earth are gathered before the throne of the Son of Man. You can almost envision row after row of humanity, lined up, waiting for the word: “You go left”; or, “You go right.” There are obviously two groups of people: Those identified as being sheep, and those identified as being goats.

- 1) For the sheep, there is good news! They are given divine blessing and are identified as the true heirs of God’s Kingdom, because they provided food, drink, hospitality, clothing, and care for the Son of Man.
- 2) For the goats, the news is not good. They are condemned into “eternal fire” because they supplied none of these ministries, even though the Son of Man was hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, and in prison. It is a chilling image!

All of this is pretty well straight forward up to this point, but the parable takes a curious twist that surprises us when we realize that the sheep had no idea whatsoever that, in their compassion toward people in need, they were providing ministry to the Son of Man. In a like manner, neither did the goats have a clue that, in their

indifference, they were in fact neglecting the Lord of all nations, He who in God's own time would sit in judgment over all people and all nations. Both groups are stunned and exclaim: "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison?" (Matthew 25:44) Of course, the surprising reply is that whenever they acted --- or failed to act --- compassionately "to one of the least of these who are members of my family." (Long, pg. 284) Are you beginning to see why we need regular checkups?

This brings us back to our questions for every parable, questions that take us to the heart of our final checkup for 2011 as we come to yet the close of another year in the life of the Church: What does the parable of the sheep and the goats tell us about God, and what does it tell us about ourselves? John Buchanan, the now retired pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago lifts up three critical points that help us with these questions. (Buchanan, John. Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4, pgs. 334 & 336)

- 1) Concerning God: The God of Jesus, the God of the Bible, is not a remote supreme being on a throne up there above the clouds, or out there somewhere in the mysterious reaches of the universe. Jesus has taught us that the Kingdom is at hand, and God is here, Emmanuel, ...God with us in the messy and ambiguities of human life. God is here, particularly in your neighbor, in the stranger in our community, in those who are suffering that need us. You want to see the face of God? Look into the face of one of the least of these, ...the vulnerable, the weak, the alien, the children. That is the first point: God is here now, present in those we are called to serve.
- 2) Buchanan makes a second radical point concerning religion: There is not one word in this parable about ecclesiastical connections or about religious practices. There is not a word in this parable about theology, creeds, orthodoxies, the correct way to worship, or who may hold forth in a pulpit. There is only one qualification that sets a person among the sheep and not the goats, and that qualification is whether or not you saw Jesus Christ in the face of the needy and whether or not you gave yourself away in love in his name.
- 3) And Buchanan's third point is most important of all: This parable does not seek to make a social point, or a political point, economic or religious points. The parable tells us something about ourselves that is a crucial matter of life and death. It is a point I made in a

sermon several weeks ago. God wants not only a new world modeled on the values of Jesus. God wants more. He wants us--- each of us, and all of us! "God is not a social engineer," says Buchanan, "God is our God of love who wants to save our souls, to use the language of the old revival meetings." God wants to save our souls and redeem us and give us the gift of life --- true, deep, authentic human life. God wants to save us by touching our hearts with love. God wants to save us by persuading us to care for others and to see other human beings who need us, regardless of who they are, where they come from, or the circumstances of their lives. God wants to save us from obsessing about ourselves, our own needs, by persuading us to forget about ourselves, and worry about others. (Buchanan. Feasting on the Word, pg. 336)

Buchanan says, "This is God's favorite project (and it is a project whose outcome is life or death): God wants to teach you and me the fundamental lesson of all life, the secret, the truth that wins the King's divine, holy blessing: that truth, ...to love is to live." (Buchanan. Feasting on the Word, pg. 336)

This is God's lesson for us on this Dedication Sunday, this Help Center Sunday, this Thanksgiving Week 2011, this random Lord's Day at some point in time before God's final judgment arrives. It is a lesson that can and should guide us in all of our responses to these causes, events and special days that are before us.

To love is to live,  
and to live is to see the face of Jesus in everyone whom we meet.  
(Buchanan. Feasting on the Word, pg. 336)