

Your Kingdom Come...

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Shepherd of Israel, help us hear no voice but yours. Gather into Christ's holy reign the broken, the sorrowing, and the sinner, that all may know wholeness, joy, and forgiveness. Amen'

Nov. 26, 2017 Christ the King

Fort Hill Presbyterian Church

In the church calendar, today is Christ the King Sunday. It is the final day of the year that reminds us that in the end, Christ reigns supreme. His ways are known in all the earth at the Final Judgment Day. So we read two passages today about Shepherd Kings. Shepherds, servant leaders, who seek the welfare of God's children are who God intends to lead. When we pray your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven, we are praying for this kind of world now.

In an era when the leaders of Israel did what political leaders the world over have almost always tended to do—namely, take good care of the important and shove aside the weak and the marginalized—Ezekiel looks ahead to a day when a new Shepherd would come from the line of David and do the exact opposite of what the world does: he'd make **extra** room for the weak, he'd deal **tenderly** with the disenfranchised, he'd seek **high and low** to bring back those who had been scattered for whatever the reason.

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

34:11 For thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out.

34:12 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.

34:13 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.

34:14 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.

34:15 I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD.

34:16 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.

34:20 Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep.

34:21 Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide,

34:22 I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep.

34:23 I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd.

34:24 And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken.

Matthew 25:31-46

25:31 "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.

25:32 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,

25:33 and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

25:34 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;

25:35 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,

25:36 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.'

25:37 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?

25:38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing?

25:39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?'

25:40 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.'

25:41 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;

25:42 for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink,

25:43 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.'

25:44 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?'

25:45 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.'

25:46 And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

Proclamation of the Word

As children we learn to sort early on. I found this toy that was a favorite at our house. It is shaped like a little house with different shape holes, so that little Hallie and Avery could learn to place the triangle in the triangle hole, the circle in the circle slot, and so on. We learn pretty early to sort, organize, categorize, and then generalize.

We sort ourselves on this annual football weekend, rivalry weekend in the College Football world. Which team are you? I have learned that the Sunday after Rival Saturday will find people on either side, elated or mourning. It matters which side we are one, what colors we wear, who won, and who lost.

We sort people into groups, too: the poor, the homeless, the unemployed, the rich, liberal, conservative. We sort into categories. Before there were nations, there were tribes and clans. I

imagine us all like young kids in the Harry Potter scene with the famous sorting hat, which decides which house you belong to- "Gryffindor!" "Hufflepuff!" "Ravenclaw!" and those despicable ones, "Slytherin." A place for everyone and every kind. Everyone knows their place. Such neat lines make the world more understandable and clear. We don't really need to know someone personally because we all know what those Slytherin folks are like, right?

It is so easy to sort people into categories. It keeps things uncomplicated, right? There is a whole book about this entitled, The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing us Apart.ⁱⁱ

God is a sorter, too, the Bible reveals. Jesus talks about the Final Judgment at the end of the age sorting us into sheep and goats. Jesus talked about separating wheat and chaff, wheat and weeds, good fruit and bad fruit. The Big Sort. In the end, it will all be revealed. John, the writer of Revelation, describes a lake of fire into which those whose names are not in God's book of life are written are thrown. Sorted. Yikes!

Today's text from Ezekial reminds us that God will gather the vulnerable sheep who have been unjustly, violently scattered and care for them. The God starts divvying up. Fat sheep to the left. Lean sheep to the right. To those who got fat and exploited their fellow sheep at their expense, who profited off of their suffering, "You're out!" the divine umpire yells.

Then Jesus, the King of heaven and earth, sorts the sheep and the goats. Unbeknownst to either group, when they cared for the least of these: the hungry person, the stranger, the prisoner, the lonely and sick, they did so to Jesus himself, for Jesus has a particular care for the vulnerable among us. Both the sheep and the goats are surprised that they were caring for or ignoring Jesus himself in their downtrodden neighbors. The Sheep are on the right side of this one. They are deemed acceptable, righteous, faithful.

Sorry, goats- "You're out!"

God sorts in different ways than most of us. We choose neighborhoods, churches, and schools that we feel are most "like us." We judge on categories. We sort by what we assume about people based on where they live, how they vote, what they do for a living based on what we think we know.

I made this mistake once when I served on the Atlanta Presbytery staff in Youth Ministry and was lovingly called out. I commented that perhaps the reason our African American churches did not attend youth retreats was cost. I assumed socioeconomics were the issue and used my small town SC standards to judge. In my experience, most Afr. Americans were economically disadvantaged. Kindly, Dr. Floyd Rhodes, an Afr. American, corrected me, speaking the truth in love. He told me that African American Presbyterians in Atlanta tended to be middle to upper middle class. My prejudice was wrong. Finding that out helped me learn that there were more complex issues involved in their lack of participation. Since the goal was to be about God's mission, then we needed to understand these matters. Dr. Rhodes allowed me to admit my ignorance, and lovingly corrected me.

God does not sort the same way we humans do. According to Matthew, God cares about how we treat our fellow sheep, regardless of what they think, where they live, how they vote, or even what creed they confess.

"How did you treat my brothers and sisters?" Jesus asks. Matthew is the most Jewish of the gospel writers and for Jews, Behavior trumps Belief. God has a prejudice towards loving kindness, justice, and care for the most vulnerable among us.

We who profess that Christ as King, Sovereign Lord of the universe, must ask ourselves this defining question, "**Are living under the Reign of Christ and obeying his commands or our own?**"

We see that God is intently PERSONAL, seeing each person in his or her need, no longer a category. Jesus notices and pays attention to the people most ignored and hurting. Ignored and ignorance go hand in hand. We are usually ignorant of those we ignore.

Pastor James Howell of Myers Park Methodist in Charlotte shares this memory.ⁱⁱⁱ He recalls a minister he met when he was young: Gordon Weekley, once a prominent Baptist pastor in Charlotte who succumbed to prescription medication abuse, then amphetamines, and then wound up on the streets – but then was miraculously (sic SAVED) cured and engaged in stunningly transformative ministry to the addicted and homeless. He handed Howell a copy of an anonymous piece he had seen many times since – but somehow, coming from Gordon Weekley, Howell was transfixed, and determined to lead churches that are different. The piece reads,

I was hungry, and you formed a humanities group to discuss my hunger; I was imprisoned, and you crept off quietly to your chapel and prayed for my release; I was naked, and in your mind you debated the morality of my appearance; I was sick, and you knelt and thanked God for your health; I was homeless, and you preached to me of spiritual shelter and the love of God; I was lonely, and you left me alone to pray for me. You seem so holy, so close to God – but I am still very hungry, and lonely, and cold.

Unlike the ignorant sheep and goats, we know what Jesus requires of us.

There are many ways to respond to this Judgment of Jesus. I think a first step is to commit to getting know persons, not categories. When we know a person, their labels and categories we assigned him or her seem to dissolve. I think this is our best hope for moving beyond the clustering of like-mindedness and the big sort. In fact, the church, we as followers of Jesus, are commanded to do so.

Faith is never private, but it is always personal. And that effect how we interact with the larger community and society. A biblical vision of God includes the transformation of society. In fact, two of the Six Great Ends of the Church are "the promotion of social righteousness; and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world."

Your Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.

Last week I went to a gathering at Abel Baptist Church to hear a panel of folks discuss how to communicate effectively with public officials. I learned that in Clemson we have some hidden pockets of poverty and some predominantly African American neighborhoods that are struggling. I heard persons with whom I do not interact on a daily basis talk about the fears they have of developers buying up the houses around them, driving up their taxes, and running them out of their homes. One woman shared that her home is on the land her grandparents worked hard to have, and then passed down to her. Her great-grandparents number among the slaves who built some buildings of Clemson University, but it is becoming harder to afford to live in her community. I heard grief and loss in her voice. I learned that some of our neighbors are having a hard time. Her story reminded me of living in Atlanta where I saw gentrification up close. When the min. wage workers are forced to move further and further out, it destroys community and makes life very difficult for our neighbors.

When I spoke with Pastor Flemming afterwards, we wondered how our church families can get to know one another, understand each other's concerns, and work together as Christians. I thought worshipping together is noble, but does not provide a chance to get to know one another. He suggested that we break bread and eat together. He bragged on the great cooks in his church. Sounds like a good starting place to me. I'll keep you posted.

Jesus did that. He practiced table fellowship with all sorts of people, seeing beyond their labels and categories and welcoming the stranger as honored guest. He also got in trouble with the establishment for doing so. Maybe having contact with others different from us is so threatening because not only will it change us, but it will change the world.

Your Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. That is the transformation of society.

In the end the Jesus is the Judge, the King sitting on the throne. We are called to serve those in need in his name. We are his hands and feet on earth, his Body, his Church. And whether we know it or not, how we treat those in need, is how we treat Jesus.

We are prone to sort people. But so does Jesus. Sheep or Goat?

I am not sure I like Judge Jesus, but John Buchanan describes Jesus as Judge this helpful way.^{iv}

God desires a world modeled on the values of Jesus. God wants us- each one of us. God wants to save us, to save our souls.

God want to save our souls, redeem us, and give us the gift of life- true, deep, authentic human life.

God wants to save by touching our hearts with love. God wants to save us by helping us see other human beings who need us.

God wants to save us from obsessing over ourselves, our own needs, by helping us see the needs of others and to be truly concerned.

God who judges us, does it to save us. And God judges us based on how we judge and serve others. We who love to sort people into groups and categories, find in the end that God in Jesus Christ judges us based on the ultimate criterion of how we treat those among us in the most need, Jesus' little ones, the vulnerable.

God judges us because God desires to teach us the ultimate secret and truth of life- that to love is to live.

Your Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.

ⁱ Prayer resource found at <http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/prayers>

ⁱⁱ Thankful for Jill Duffield in her weekly lectionary reflections through the *Presbyterian Outlook*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Howell, James, "What Can we Say about Christ the King?" in his Weekly Preaching Notions blog, November 1, 2017, jameshowellsweeklypreachingnotions.blogspot.com/

^{iv} paraphrased from John Buchanan, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4*, Bartlett and Brown, ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011),p. 336.