

Sermon – November 22, 2020
“I was hungry and you gave me food”
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: Matthew 25:31-46

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Visit, fill, and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word. Amen

Good morning to everyone here in this place and to those who have joined with us or will join with us on the live stream. On the church’s calendar, today is Christ the King Day. It is a day on which we remember that Christ will return again in glory as a righteous judge over all people. This morning’s scripture gives us some insight into that coming time of Christ’s return, as well as some insight into what we are to be doing until that day arrives. Before we look at this morning’s scripture, let’s take a few minutes to celebrate some of the events that have occurred in our Charge this past week.

Let’s start with the Afton Bible study where this past week we learned about the call of the disciples by Jesus. During the Fairfield’s Bible study, we began to look at the concept of being covenant people and how that idea grows in the Old Testament. We have begun to make plans for a Christmas Eve service, and we also had discussions this week about how the Charge could better focus our energies for nurture of our congregations, outreach into the community, and growing in our ability to share the Good News with people in this community. We had a blessed time of sharing and prayer as the Fairfield’s prayer group met via Zoom and shared prayer concerns collected from the congregation and then prayed over those concerns. Finally, some of us, along with some friends from Fredericksburg area churches, came together again to work on Everette Hanson’s house. Let me share a few pictures this morning from that time. Thank you for all of the support you give that allows us to be instruments of Christ. Consider joining with each other to develop new opportunities to share the love of Christ in our community.

Let me also wish everyone a Happy Thanksgiving and remind you to drive carefully if you travel over the holiday. Please take time as you celebrate during Thanksgiving Day to stop and thank God for all of the blessings, trials, and love that we have received over the last year. It is my

prayer for each of you that God will bless your celebrations and keep you safe as we seek to give thanks for God's blessings. Happy Thanksgiving.

As we start to look at this week's scripture reading, let me talk a bit about judgment. This has been a theme in all of the parables we have encountered over the last several weeks, and we should note it is a theme that is found in Jesus' teaching. This morning's parable of the sheep and goats, which is not a parable but more of an end-time description with the analogy of a shepherd separating his sheep and goats, is used to give us insight into the final judgment. This scripture is rooted in Old Testament prophecy. For example, hear the words from Daniel 7:13-14, "As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed." Here we find one like a son of man being given dominion and glory and kingship over all peoples. Jesus, as he shares this teaching about the final judgment, connects to this Old Testament prophecy and reveals to us that it is through him that this prophecy will be fulfilled. In Daniel, the prophet speaks to the coming judgment of Israel, but Jesus gives us the fuller fulfillment of this prophecy being made complete through him. Jesus tells us that he will come in his glory with all the angels of heaven. This is Jesus as a prophet speaking to a future time when he in his glory as king will raise up all people for judgment. It does not matter if a person believes that this will occur or not. Jesus tells us that it will occur and that it will be done through and by him. All will see him. Every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. They will believe and recognize him as Lord when they are faced with this moment of judgment even if they have denied Jesus in their life.

Now a lot of words have been written about the separation of sheep and goats and what this analogy represents. I think we are better served if we will recall that shepherds did separate the sheep and the goats for a number of reasons and that this action would be known to those listening. It is Jesus using the familiar to help explain the unfamiliar. Let me explain this not in the context of sheep and goats and their attributes, but in a context I understand and that helps me grasp the point of this analogy. For many years, before the falling of the leaves, I have walked through the woods on our farm and marked the trees that have died. After the leaves have fallen from all of the trees, it is difficult to decide which are dead and which will bud out and thrive in the spring. Those trees that

I mark are cut down and burned in our wood stove to heat the house. Those that are left are those that will put forth new buds in the spring and in due season bring forth fruit. This is what I think Jesus is telling us with the separation of the sheep and goats. The shepherd can tell the difference and can separate them according to their attributes that he recognizes. I can separate the living and dead trees in the early fall according to their attributes. Jesus as king can look at the hearts of humans and separate the righteous from the unrighteous. That is the point of the analogy, that Jesus has the ability as king to look into the heart of a person and know if they are to be placed at his right hand or left. He is able to separate out those who have borne fruit in their lives from those who have not. At the end of time, Jesus will sit upon the judgment seat and look into our hearts and separate us into two groups: the righteous and the unrighteous.

The criteria the king uses to separate the two groups is of utmost importance to us. Notice what is present in this dialogue between the king and those he has separated into the sheep category and placed at his right hand. He tells them, "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." The king does not mention salvation directly in this exchange. Instead, he tells those at his right hand, those who are blessed by his Father, to inherit the kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world. Notice that this is the intent of the Father from creation, to have the righteous inherit the kingdom that was prepared for them at creation, but from which their fallen nature has separated them. At the final judgment, those whom the king judges as righteous are called forth into the kingdom. Listen again to the criteria that the king uses as the basis for judgment, "... 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." Those to whom the king speaks are surprised at these words and ask when did they do these things for the king? When did their actions constitute care for the king? And the king replies, "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." Those who are sheep are surprised to hear that the actions they have done out of compassion for those in need are actually done for Jesus. Jesus is closely connected to the least of these. He is closely connected to those we often do not see. Yet when we love them, we love the king.

Now if we are not careful, as we read these words in the exchange between the king and the sheep, our Protestant heritage will rise up and we will get distracted by the idea of works righteousness. We can begin to ask ourselves, “Are these sheep by their own works? Have they worked their way into heaven?” Let me remind us before those thoughts get too far developed in our minds that this short passage is not a complete picture of the body of scripture that touches on salvation and being a follower of Christ. We need to exercise great caution if we reach into scripture and pull a single verse out and use that extraction as a total voice for all that scripture speaks on the subject of salvation and being included in the kingdom of heaven. The concept of salvation is not in the picture in these verses. What is in the picture is a discussion of the attributes of those who are living and loving in a manner that is consistent with the kingdom of God. The results of lives lived in light of salvation are in the picture. This is a statement of the expectation for the sharing of the love that those who are saved have received. This is a statement about those who have accepted Jesus Christ into their lives as king and have lived accordingly. There is limitless grace for those in the kingdom, but much is demanded of those who receive that grace. God’s plan for all nations is in view. God’s intention is for all people to come to salvation and be transformed into channels of steadfast love, mercy, grace, and compassion. Kingdom people are to be those with fruit in abundance in their lives. What the king notices is what the sheep have done out of love for the least. We should note the surprise of the sheep at the presence of Jesus in these criteria; what they have done was for the least. The sheep have not connected Jesus with the least as they have given food and water, visited the sick and those in prison, welcomed the stranger, and clothed the naked. These actions are examples of the steadfast love Jesus has poured into their hearts through the gift of salvation, which they have in turn given to others who include the least among them. They have not done these things because they saw Jesus, but because they are open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit and are obedient to go, love, and be the body of Christ.

As a Methodist pastor, I often am asked about scripture that I think captures my own understanding of what it means to follow Christ. These verses from Matthew are a significant part of my reply. In these verses, the word of God begins to speak to my heart, and I seek to be one who lives in a manner that loves others as the king looks for us to have lived and loved. I do not always get this correct, but it is to these words I am drawn when I am seeking to understand what steadfast love of others is to look like in my life. I find it is very difficult for us as those blessed to live in the United States to grasp the riches we have been given and to recognize the opportunity we have to

pour out blessings into the lives of others. It is my prayer for all of us that we will begin to grasp this idea of loving others through actions, and we will seek to be those who are living as kingdom people. Let me encourage each of us to read through this list of actions and seek to develop them in our lives and the life of our congregation. Let us encourage one another to be channels of the steadfast love of God to the least of these around us.

In the woods that I seek to manage, of those trees that are marked, many are cut down for firewood. These are the trees that do not bear the fruit of compassion, mercy, and grace. So also, the king turns to those he has placed at his left hand and speaks to them. Gone are the kind words of love for those who are living as kingdom people. Instead, there are harsh words and a sending of these to the fire prepared for the devil and his angels. Notice that the king does not speak to the fire being prepared for his people, those created in the image of the Father. This eternal fire, eternal burning, is reserved for the devil and his minions, but also is used for those who have not lived as kingdom people. These are people who have not shown love for the least of these who live among them with the result they are sent into eternal punishment. Our hearts should be heavy that any of those raised up from the dead would be found on the left hand of the king to be sent into such punishment. We should also fear that we have fallen short of a life that reflects the nature of kingdom people, a life where steadfast love is poured out through us onto the least of these.

I want to be clear that the works of love outlined are not the means by which one enters the kingdom of God. They are sustaining evidence of a life where a heart has been transformed by regeneration through Jesus Christ. The response, the works of love they focus on the least of these, are confirmation that they have accepted Jesus as their savior and belong to him. Without this evidence, those who profess to be followers of Jesus are found not to have the criteria to be part of the kingdom. Jesus as the righteous judge looks upon the heart and is able to identify those who are righteous and those who are not. It is not enough to do the works of the kingdom; the works must come from a heart transformed by Christ. John Wesley held that while helping the poor may be of some benefit for them and their situation, unless it is done with a transformed heart, a heart overflowing with the steadfast love of God, those works were simply sinful acts of pride. Unless they are done for the glory of God, they fall short of the kingdom. Those without Christ can help others but cannot work their way into heaven.

In response to this scripture, I begin to ask myself questions: “Am I doing the works that are an outgrowth of the love, grace, and mercy that I have received? Am I ready to face Christ the

King? What should I be doing to share steadfast love with others? Do I see Jesus in the lives of the least of these? Is there evidence in my life that will allow me to join the sheep and be judged to be righteous?" As a congregation, those same questions apply to each of us. And since we know the fate of those who are not in a relationship with Jesus Christ, we have to ask ourselves, "Do we have compassion for others who are not at work in the kingdom and face judgment? Do we see those in need and respond with compassion? As we drive the roads here in this place, are our eyes open? Do we see those in need? What are we doing to reach the lost? As scenes of need come to us, do we respond?" Those who have the goods of the world and see another in need and do not respond, sin. John Wesley insisted that Methodists go in person and visit the poor. When we go, the experience changes us and changes our understanding of their situation. We can easily get caught up in helping others and miss the image of God in those we are seeking to help. By going to them in person, we open ourselves to encounter the love of God flowing in relationships. If we seek to help others, they are helped, but if we love them, we are changed. We should have hearts for those who do not know Jesus as savior. We know what the judgment holds for the unfruitful, and our lives should be marked by actions to love others as Christ loves us. We are to be those who have been transformed by the love of Jesus and are worshiping, praying, going, seeing, and loving the least of those in this community. Remember my idea that we should start as three-hour-a-week people: one hour each week in worship of God, one hour each week in study, and one hour of loving others. This is a start to let our hearts be transformed and then found at work in the kingdom with the least of these. What will we do this day, this week, in the coming year to develop within ourselves and each other the attributes of worshiping, praying, seeing, going, and loving the least of these? What are we doing to learn to love those who are in danger of the fire prepared for the devil and his angel? Where is our compassion for them and our striving to help them find the steadfast love of God? We want to hear those words for ourselves and for all people and all the nations, and to so live that none would be sent to the fire prepared for the devil. Let's get ready to worship, pray, be open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and then look, see, go, love and be those prepared and at work in the kingdom of God, right here, right now.

Pray with me: Father, open our eyes to see those in this place who are the least of these. Jesus, send the Holy Spirit to guide us, to empower us, to give us courage to be kingdom people right here right now. Jesus, teach us to love as you love us. Jesus, transform us that we might be sheep in your kingdom. Amen.