

The Difference Maker

Last Sunday of Church Year – 11/22/20 – Mt. Calvary Luth.
Text: Matthew 25:31-46 Pastor Keith Besel

v. 34, [Jesus says to the sheep,] **“Come, you who are blessed by My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”**

v. 40, **“Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these My brothers, you did it to Me.”**

Introduction

- ⊗ Dear Christians, there are so many people who need our help today. There are of course those who are struggling with Covid, including those who have survived it but now have lasting health problems. There are those with other illnesses or ailments, be it a new diagnosis, a constant struggle or now a time of recovery.
 - ➔ There are many who are unemployed; many whose businesses have been hurt by pandemic restrictions. There are students of every age struggling to learn online, and their parents and others who are challenged in supervising and tutoring them.
 - ➔ And now after up to 8 months of isolation, there are countless people hurting with loneliness and depression and what is being called “Pandemic Fatigue”, as well as those struggling with mental health issues not connected to the Pandemic, but now overlooked or made worse because of it.
- ⊗ Many of these people in need folks are fellow believers in Jesus; many are not. If you pay even a little attention, you’ll quickly see that the needs greatly outweigh our ability to provide help. It can be so overwhelming.

I. We Christians have difficulty helping those in need.

- ⊗ Consider the following scenario: A man comes home from a long and hard day at work. He grabs the mail from the mailbox and once he takes off his shoes, he sits down to open the mail.
 - ➔ And of course, most of the envelopes have bills inside. One after another, they add up. After four or five, reality kicks in and he becomes overwhelmed by his mounting debt.
 - ➔ Then he sees a letter from his church. He opens it to find that it is asking him to prayerfully consider giving an offering of support for a very worthy mission effort; one he has supported in the past. Genuinely sorry, he concludes, “I just can’t give again this year”. And with a deep sigh, he puts his head in his hands in despair.
- ⊗ I am certain that at some level, you and I can relate to this Christian’s situation. Most of us truly want to contribute to the work of Christ’s church, whether it is financially or in service or in some other way. Yet at times our financial resources are strained or the amount of time we have to spare is limited or we have health restrictions or something else.
 - ➔ As a general rule though, Christians want to help other Christians. It’s a desire that’s just part of the sanctified nature Christ has given to us.
 - ➔ But too often our own needs overwhelm us so that the needs of others are overshadowed or even impossible for us to see and we just can’t help out as we would like.

- ✘ Look, our own needs can take many forms – too little time, too little money, health and other restrictions of our own. Many of these limitations are legitimate. But at the same time Satan and our own self-centered sin can twist these needs into convenient excuses, invented so that we can keep more than we “need” of our worldly time and treasure, and then get out of serving the Lord in ministering to those with needs far more severe than our own.
- ✘ In verses 35-36 Jesus describes those who, without their knowing it, served Him by serving Christ’s “brothers” (v.40) – that is fellow believers in His Church. In hearing this word from Jesus we are all convicted to see more clearly our neglect of others in need. It’s only natural to hear these words from Jesus, “For I was hungry and you gave Me food, I was thirsty and you gave Me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed Me, I was naked and you clothed Me, I was sick and you visited Me, I was in prison and you came to Me” and like those before Jesus in this text we too have to ask, “Lord, when...?” When did I do those kinds of things?
 - It’s possible that these words might even cause you to wonder, “If I haven’t been doing these things, am I even among the ‘sheep’ (v.33); among those who are considered the ‘righteous’ (v.37); who are true believers in Christ?”
 - So yes, with a deep sigh, it might cause you and me to feel overwhelmed and put our head in our hands in despair like the man looking at the letter from his church.

II. Fortunately, an inheritance makes all the difference.

- ✘ But you see, there was one more letter on the table before the man that day. It looked very official. He opened it to find a letter from an attorney announcing that he was receiving an unexpected inheritance from a distant relative.
 - What kind of difference do you think that news made in that man’s life right then? His feeling of being overwhelmed melted away into great relief. His despair was now replaced with peace; with hope for a completely different future than he had seen only moments before.
 - Now the man was changed. Now he would be able to give generously to the mission of Christ; and to do it with great joy.
- ✘ In Jesus’ picture of the Last Day before us in our Gospel Reading, He speaks to His sheep and He wants them to understand, without even a shred of doubt, that they have received a great inheritance!
 - Any and all of their kind actions and words toward “the least of these” among them in life have no connection to their own worth. That’s right, their financial accounts, their personal characteristics and their talents have nothing to do with their real value. No, their ability to help and serve “the least of these, who are Christ’s ‘brothers’ and sisters of faith” (v.40) comes entirely from Jesus’ promise to them that they are receiving an eternal inheritance.
 - So it is with you and me today, dear brothers and sisters. All Christians; all who believe and confess Jesus to be their Savior from sin and death exclusively by His work on the cross, have been made heirs in our Baptism. We have been transformed from sinners to the core into undeserved recipients of Christ’s righteousness the moment that the Word was proclaimed and the water was poured over us in name of the Triune God.
 - AND in that moment we inherited the power and ability also to show kindness to our brothers and sisters in Christ and to others. The excuses are gone folks. And the possibilities are as numerous and creative as there are believers. If you can’t help in traditional ways, ask the Lord and He will help you find new ways to serve and help and support others.

- ✘ Understand that just because that man in our story received a letter, it still took some time for his relative's estate to be settled and for the inheritance to be received. Similarly, we have received in His Word the promise of our future in Christ. Some of it we have now – forgiveness, peace, assurance. But the fullness of our inheritance in Jesus will not be realized until the day of His final return.
 - ➔ You see, in our text, the foundational difference between the sheep and the goats is not their behavior. It is the inheritance prepared for the sheep. And verse 34 is clear that this inheritance has been prepared for God's people from the foundation of the world. God planned it all at the beginning of time. That's how far back His love for you goes folks.
 - ➔ Revelation 13:8 tells us that our names have been written "before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain". You see, your name is there, not because you are such a giving person, but because Jesus came to be the sacrificial lamb on the cross in your place. Our inheritance comes in the precious blood of Christ with which He paid the price for our guilt. Likewise it is His body now raised from death, because as Acts 2:24 tells us, it could not hold Him in the grave that means we too will rise to live forever before the throne of God.
 - ➔ Ephesians 1:13-14 assures us that we can be at peace when we think of Judgment Day; of Christ's return because of the Holy Spirit received and living in us from our Baptismal day. Paul says, "In Christ you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in Him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of His glory".

III. We are enabled to live as heirs.

- ✘ This text today gives us a glimpse; a preview of what will happen when Jesus returns. And notice that there are almost no commands – even though many people read commands into the text on their own.
 - ➔ When Jesus describes the behavior of the sheep and the goats, He's talking about the great difference that His gift; that His inheritance makes deep in the souls of all believers.
 - ➔ The good works done by the sheep are not their own works, but instead the works that naturally come to believers who live as Christ's heirs. Paul talks about this in Ephesians 2:10 after he teaches that we are not saved because we are good, but only because of Jesus' undeserved work done for us on the cross. Then he tells us about the works that we do after we have come to faith saying, "We are [God's] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them".
 - ➔ You see, as Christians, all we simply do is what now comes naturally. We serve "the least of these" brothers and sisters in Christ.
- ✘ The world of goats around us; those who do not believe in Jesus see us do these things and they can't understand why we are so different than they are; why we do things that to them make no sense.
 - ➔ It's because God's promised inheritance transforms us from people who were previously worried about ourselves, into people who now look toward and think about our brothers and sisters who need our help. It's all about Jesus. He is the difference-maker by making us heirs of eternal life.
 - ➔ Yes, Jesus makes us glad; Jesus gets us excited to help our brothers and sisters in need.

Conclusion

✘ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran pastor imprisoned and killed because he would not obey Hitler in WWII, described the way that Christians treat one another. He said that Christians practice “the self-forgetfulness of love” (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Communion of Saints* [New York: Harper and Row: 1963], 123).

➔ That’s how much our Christian inheritance impacts us. Because we know that God has given us a magnificently rich and eternal inheritance, we are able to forget about ourselves and our own needs because we know there is nothing we can do or buy or say on our own that adds one bit to what God has already given us in Jesus.

✘ Remember the man we talked about who received word of an inheritance? That news made all the difference. It moved him to self-forgetful endurance and generosity. And that’s what the word of Jesus does for us today. His self-forgetful love toward us on the cross gives us an inheritance promised from the foundation of the world that makes it possible for us to do what we could not imagine before.

➔ Now in joy, you and I exercise self-forgetful generosity toward others; toward the “least of these [Christ’s] brothers” (v. 40), because in His self-forgetful love He has made us His sheep; sheep who are headed for His kingdom upon His return. Amen.