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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Last Sunday of the Church Year (Proper 29A)

November 23, 2014

Text: Matthew 25:31–46

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The Lord is my Shepherd...I am the Good Shepherd. One of the most enduring and beloved images in Holy Scripture is God being described as our shepherd. We draw strength and comfort from the Biblical promises that God will guide and care for us as a shepherd cares for his beloved sheep. The Lord Jesus exemplifies this most clearly and beautifully for He is the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the salvation and safety of His sheep. Before Satan and the grave can harm you, they've got to go through the crucified and resurrected Good Shepherd. That is comforting indeed.

But I wonder, dear people of God, if you've ever considered Jesus the Good Shepherd and Jesus the Righteous Judge of the living and the dead in the same thought. Today's OT and Gospel readings do that very thing. Let's begin with the first part of the OT reading from the prophet Ezekiel 34, "For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness" (vs. 11–12). These are marvelous words. God Himself will search for His lost sheep.

Innumerable sermons could be preached on these words. Sermons about God's perfect love for imperfect sinners, God's ability to save sinners who can't save themselves, God's grace which risks everything to save helpless sheep, the ultimate and final salvation promised to redeemed sheep, etc. And then we could add vs. 15–16 to the mix, "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. 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, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice." These are the kinds of words, thoughts, and images we're used to when we think about God being our Shepherd. And this is good, right, and salutary.

But Ezekiel also describes God the Shepherd as being the judge over His sheep. It's found in the next section, "Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them: behold, I, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep" (vs. 20). The Good Shepherd is also the Good Judge. Vs. 22 combines both into one verse, "I will rescue my flock; they shall no longer be a prey (that's the Good Shepherd imagery we're used to). And I will judge between sheep and sheep" (that's the Good Shepherd as the Righteous Judge we're not so used to). God the Good Shepherd is also God the Righteous Judge of the sheep. He separates, distinguishes, and pronounces judgment over His beloved sheep.

We might ask ourselves if the Biblical teaching of God being the Good Shepherd/Judge is good news or terrifying news. Let's continue with vs. 23–24, "And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. I am the LORD; I have spoken." The "one shepherd, my servant David" refers to none other than the Lord Jesus Christ who said of Himself, in John 10:11, I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" and then in vs. 14, "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me..." Any time we hear about Jesus being involved with something we should take great comfort and courage. It's great news that Jesus is the Good Shepherd/Judge.

The rule and reign of God the Holy Trinity in our lives comes to us through Jesus the Good Shepherd, the same Shepherd who died and rose again to take away our sins through the still waters of His holy baptism, to bring us into His eternal kingdom by means of the celebration of His Communion table, to lead us to the green pastures of His eternal inheritance so that we can dwell in the house of the Lord forever. That's marvelous, outstanding good news! Jesus our Good Shepherd.

But we must never forget, to the peril of our immortal souls, that Jesus our Good Shepherd is also Jesus our Righteous Judge. The Lord Himself makes this abundantly clear in the Gospel reading from Matthew 25, "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left" (vs. 31–33).

Because Jesus is the Good Shepherd, He will also separate His believing, redeeming sheep from the unbelieving, condemned goats. Jesus pronounces this judgment over the righteous standing to His right, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for from the foundation of the world” (vs. 34). The Good Shepherd declares them to be blessed and their reward is a kingdom established for them before the beginning of time. That’s good news indeed! To the unrighteous standing on His left, Jesus pronounced this judgment, “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (vs. 41). The Good Shepherd declares them to be cursed and their punishment is the eternal fire intended not for them, but for the devil and his angels. This is the most lamentable news imaginable.

What has often troubled Christians about Matthew 25 is the listing of all the good works or the lack of good works as the evidence used to support whether one is a Christian believer or an unbeliever: feeding the hungry and relieving the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, and visiting the prisoners (vs. 35–36). The initial reaction of many is that Christians must be saved because of their good works. The unbelievers must be condemned because they didn’t do all those good things. Such a conclusion isn’t supported by the entire Bible nor even this particular reading from the Bible.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd who knows His flock. In other words, Jesus knows each and every Christian who believes and trusts in Him to forgive their sins, fill them with His Spirit, and redeem them unto everlasting life. Jesus knows His sheep who are born again through His Gospel gifts. Jesus also knows those who have rejected His love and gracious salvation. Jesus, the Good Shepherd and Righteous Judge, separates the people of the world according to who they are: sheep or goats (vs. 33), not according to what they’ve done. The evidence of good works or lack of good works is but supporting testimony vindicating the righteousness of the Lord’s commendation, for the sheep, or condemnation, for the goats.

Christians lived their lives according to their most holy faith, loving their neighbors in thought, word, and deed. They did these things because of who they were, because of who Jesus had redeemed them to be by His death and resurrection. Conversely, the unbelievers didn’t do those things, certainly not in faith as they didn’t have saving faith. Their lack of good works merely supports what Jesus the Good Shepherd already knows to be true: cursed unbelievers who rejected the love of the Shepherd.

But we mustn't miss the lives of faith and good works attributed to the sheep. The Christian life is lived in day to day service to one another through ordinary, unspectacular deeds of kindness and love. Their good works went largely unnoticed. A kind word, a timely visit, humble care offered with little thought of reward or recognition. You are called to love your neighbor as you have opportunity to do so. What this means for you is that all the rather mundane things you do for your family, friends, neighbors, strangers, and visitors now becomes a spiritual work of service that is well-pleasing to our Lord Jesus Christ. Nobody else notices. But Jesus does.

In fact, our Lord says that when you show love and charity to other people you are really showing love to Him. That's what He tells the saints on Judgment Day, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me" (vs. 40).

Jesus the Good Shepherd and Jesus the Righteous Judge. Both are extremely good news for you, His beloved sheep. On the Last Day, the truth of who you are in Christ will be made known to all creation. Until that great and glorious day, we join in the song sung by God's sheep throughout the ages, "Oh come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation...For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand" (Psalm 95: 1,7).

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.