

Sheep and Goats
Matthew 25:31-46

Princeton Seminary president Craig Barnes once wrote about two black Labrador retrievers that attended worship in the seminary chapel. It's not that these dogs were especially religious. Rather, they were guide dogs trained to help visually impaired students make their way across campus.

Barnes noted that when these dogs came to chapel they laid under the front pew and he added, "*They always faced the pulpit. It's a fascinating experience to look down from the pulpit, halfway through the sermon's best sentence that was oh so carefully prepared and see a couple of tired dogs looking up at me.*

He continued: *I'm struck by how many preachers keep finding ways to give the bad-dog sermon, in both conservative and progressive congregations. The pastor stands in the pulpit and scolds the world for being a mess, then scolds the congregation for allowing this mess to continue.*¹

I like to think that I don't give any "Bad Dog" sermons. I like to think that I could preach a sermon this year that I preached once before and folks would remember it. But I know that wouldn't happen. The only people who would remember that I'd preached that sermon before are the people who were critical of it the first time I preached it.

Like it or not, judgment is a fact of life. If we break the law, society will judge us. If we live immorally, drink too much, engage in sexual promiscuity, live a lifestyle of constant stress -then our body will judge us. Judgment is a fact of life. And it's a fact of death.

Jesus rarely spoke about the final judgment, but the parable I read this morning gives a strong jolt to those who are heavy on doctrine but short on ethics.

Just as a shepherd divides the sheep from the goats, said Jesus, so too shall there be a great division on the final day. Those on the right will gain entrance into the kingdom, those on the left will be turned away. And the great surprise is that those who thought they were religious turn out to be not as good as they thought, and those who thought they failed were told they did a better job than they supposed.

So let me suggest three points that I notice in this parable. First, the parable suggests that **we are to view each individual as though he or she was Christ himself**. "Lord, when did we feed you, or clothe you, or visit you in prison?" was the question that was asked. Came the response: "When you did it unto the least of these my brethren, you did it unto me."

There's an old story about the mayor of a small village who is told that the King was going to visit their humble little village. With great fanfare the mayor made the appropriate arrangements. On the day of the visit the mayor, dressed in his finery, waited in joyful anticipation.

But as hours ticked away no one entered the village. No one, that is, except a lame beggar who asked the mayor for a drink to quince his thirst. Irritatingly the mayor brushed him aside, for he was waiting for the King who never arrived. Furious he wrote the King's aide asking what had gone wrong, and was told that the King had passed through his village that day traveling incognito, dressed as a lonely lame beggar.

Who is Christ? Christ is everyman. And every woman. If the innkeeper in Bethlehem had known that Mary was carrying the long-awaited Messiah within her womb, would he have made room in the Inn that night? If the Sanhedrin had known it was God they were arresting in the garden of Gethsemane, would they have turned their hearts and honored Him?

We should view each other as if he or she was Christ himself. Secondly, this parable suggests that in the end **the criteria by which we shall be judged will be simple acts of kindness.**

In the parable the King allows entrance into his kingdom not by affiliation with any particular religious group, or fame, or fortune, or credential that might be listed in an obituary. No, the final judgment is based upon how kind a person was: feeding the hungry, showing concern for those in prison, taking care of those who don't have sufficient clothing.

Who would ever have thought that such simple acts would carry so much weight on the final day and that we'd be judged for what we view as an oversight? According to this parable, judgment comes every single day in the commonplace things that we do or don't do. Piety, orthodoxy, sound theologies don't count for everything.

Jesus is saying that the main business that we are in is the business of kindness, and it is this criterion by which God will view our life. Ignore the law of kindness and we perish.

Of course, there is a drawback in kindness. Kindness means nurturing, and nurturing takes time.

The Apostle Paul admonished the church at Ephesus: "Stop being mean, bad tempered and angry. Instead, be kind to one another, even as God has forgiven you because you belong to Christ Jesus."

Third, this parable suggests that in the end **we are judged not on the bad that we do, but the good that we do not do.** Those on the left were denied entrance into the Kingdom because he said, "I was thirsty and you gave me no water, I was in prison and you never came to see me, I was without clothes and you never gave me any".

We think divine judgment as opposite of this. We think that we'll get into heaven by refraining from certain sins. Conversely, we think sin is what sends us to hell. We think that a religious person doesn't smoke, drink, or curse. That misses the point.

There are many fine, decent respectable people in church who don't smoke, drink, or curse, who also are not doing anything for Christ. Remember the sermon last week? (Maybe it was a Bad Dog kind of sermon. Here I worry that you won't remember a sermon from a year ago and we can't even make a connection to last week!)

Last week we looked at the parable of a servant who took one talent and buried it for the Master, and then returned it in full when asked. And he was condemned. Not because he gambled it away, not because he frivolously spent it. He was condemned because he did nothing with it.

Those on the left side are kept out of the Kingdom of God, not because of what they did but because of what they did not do.

And so on this the final Sunday of the church year — Christ the King Sunday — we are left with this unsettling message about God's judgment. It's a message that most of us would rather not hear. It's a message that, frankly, I'd rather not preach. But it's a message that needs to be preached and needs to be heard.

We need to look upon each person as though they were Christ. Kindness is the criteria by which we will be judged. And it's not the bad that we don't do but the good that we fail to do that determines whether we're a sheep or a goat.

I pray that I'll continue to do that. And I hope and pray that the judge will be merciful.
Amen.

ⁱ M. Craig Barnes, "Good Dog, Bad Dog" in *The Christian Century*, November 12, 2014, p. 35.