Sheep, Goats—and Gospel? A New Year’s Homily

Co-Missioners,

On this second day of a new calendar year, we send you a homily that a little clutch of Lutherans heard two nights ago in suburban Cleveland. It comes with a brief prefatory comment by the preacher, Jerry Burce.

We wish you a Happy New Year, as in a twelve-month stretch of days made lively by the promise of Christ.

The Crossings Community

Sheep, Goats—and Gospel? A New Year’s Homily

A New Year’s Homily

by Jerome Burce

Preface

Like lots of lifelong Lutherans, I grew up attending New Year's Eve services. The first time I preached at one I was in my late 20's, a few years out of seminary. The Gospel appointed for that particular evening was the parable of the fig tree in Luke 17, a text that seemed crafted with Lutheran preachers specifically in mind. It reeks with threat—"No fruit! Chop it down!"—and soothes with promise—"Give me time; I'll work on it!" (said by the gardener, the story's Christ figure).

Some years later the lectionary was overhauled. Suddenly would-be New Year's Eve preachers found themselves staring at Matthew's end-time vision of the sheep and the goats. Is there any passage in all four Gospels that does more to incite the inner legalist? ("Look! I've been telling you all along! It's all about what *you* do—or fail to do.")

I've been convinced for a while now that the standard interpretation of Matthew 25, and of this passage in particular, is entirely wrong-headed, not least because it ignores the

context and missional thrust of Matthew as a whole. I hope to write more about this in coming months, especially since Matthew's is the gospel that predominates in our encounters with the Word of God at church this year. For now I share a homily I preached two nights ago at Messiah Lutheran Church in Fairview Park, Ohio. It reflects my revisionist's take on how we've got to hear this passage if Matthew's report on Jesus is indeed good news. I've encountered resistance to this from other colleagues. I will certainly welcome feedback from you, whether pro or con. —JB

Text: Matthew 25:31-46 (NRSV)

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. 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, 33 and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the
goats at the left. 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; 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, 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." 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? 38 And
when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or
naked and gave you clothing? 39 And when was it that we saw you
sick or in prison and visited you?" 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.” [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; [42] for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, [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.” [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?” [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.” [46] And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.’

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Homily

In the Name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

I feel as if I owe the rest of you sinners an immediate apology tonight. I say this as a sinner who happens to take the words I read you just now with profound seriousness, knowing that you do too. Of course you do. Really, it’s New Year’s Eve. The number of Americans who spend a chunk of it in church is down by now to some insane micro-fraction of the population—and here you sit. What more needs to be said or could be said about your commitment as hearers of the Word at this close of the first fifth of the twenty-first century? About your stubborn against-the-grain determination to begin and end your

every day—your every year—by tuning in to God?

So if only, says this sinner—this willful servant of God—if only I had bucked the system and laid another Word on you just now. By system, I mean the one that tells the worship leader what texts the gathered flock of Christ should hear in church on any given day or night when services are called for. Had I done the picking, I would not have read tonight from Matthew 25 about the sheep and the goats. I would have thought—I would have felt, deep down—that you, at least, deserve better.

Better, that is, than a text that almost always, without fail, leaves everybody squirming except for the folks who ought to be squirming. I mean the ones who, like the Pharisee in the temple, presume to imagine that, really, they *are* up to snuff where God is concerned. "Lord, I thank Thee that I am not like other Americans, or even like those shabbier Lutherans whose absence at the moment I trust you're noticing. I go to church on New Year's Eve. I don't care if the champagne is properly chilled. I plan to be in bed come midnight, my prayers properly said, the way they always are."

But no, this isn't you—or at least, not enough of you to keep from taking it granted that your status as a sinner is something *you* take for granted, just as I do. We know our need for Christ. "By grace we are saved, through faith, and that not of ourselves…." And again, "the good I think to do I never get around to doing, because I'm all too busy wallowing, day after day, in the selfishness I abhor. Isn't that the very thing these past twelve months bear witness to? So who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

And isn't that—precisely that—what all of us are aching to hear tonight? Instead I followed orders and gave you this: "Whatever

you failed to do to the least of my brothers and sisters, you failed to do to me." And again, "Away these wretches will go to eternal punishment."

Joy, oh joy, this New Year's Eve as I think of all those form-letter pleas to help feed the hungry and clothe the naked and aid the sick and cheer the imprisoned that I dropped unopened in the waste basket in 2019. There was, you see, this thing or two I wanted to buy, another addition to the heap of stuff my kids will be hauling to the dump some years from now when they've shuffled me off to the nursing home and it's time to de-stuff what remains of me. I can't imagine the Lord Christ was at all amused by the choices I made last year. I would so like to pretend with the rest of the world that I'll do a better job of it in 2020. But then you reach a certain age when reality sinks in and calls at last for some honesty. I know I won't do that. I won't keep the resolutions, whatever they may be—whatever they should be. I won't be standing here a year from now expecting the Judge's gold star commendation for having finally, finally pulled it off: an entire year—imagine that—without once ignoring him in any of his brothers or sisters whose need is great. This will not happen. As if, in any case, it would make up for all those other years when I left my Lord's belly bloated with malnutrition. I'm think, of course, of all those pictures I've seen and tossed in the trash.

"Away with you," the Judge says—I can hear it now. You hear it too, perhaps. And they call this the "gospel" according to St. Matthew.

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So what now?

Try Psalm 121: “I lift up my eyes to the hills. Where is my help” this New Year’s Eve? Answer: “My help comes from the Lord….”

Specifically, our help comes from him through whom all things were made, that Word who became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth, as we heard again a week ago.

Your Lord Jesus Christ, tonight’s teller of such hard and bitter truth, wants you not to forget what Christians almost always forget when they listen to this text. The scholars forget it too when they study it and tell us what *they* think it means.

Don’t forget tonight, or tomorrow for that matter, that these words I read are designed expressly for baptized ears.

Baptized ears are ears that Jesus owns. He bought them with a price. They belong to him. So does everything these ears are attached to. How dare we imagine that our future is still up for grabs, or worse, that it’s headed in the wrong direction, however much our sins and stupid folly should be pointing us that way?

Christ died for sinners and for stupid fools. He is not about to lose them now. That’s the baseline truth of the year just past, and the year about to be. It’s the rock we get to build on as the weeks and months fly by.

So here’s what baptized ears so often miss when they listen to tonight’s fearsome text. It’s not about them, or at least not in the first place.

Matthew 25 is part of Jesus’s second sermon on the mount, not that anyone thinks to call it that. He’s sitting alone with his disciples on the Mount of Olives, just outside Jerusalem, a day or two away from crucifixion. Ever since the first sermon on the mount, way back in chapter five, he’s been training those disciples up for the great commission he’ll hand them when Easter is behind him. They’ll be sent as you are sent, every single Sunday, to infiltrate the world with God’s ludicrous, breathtaking promise, anchored in Christ, of a mercy, a compassion, that defies our comprehension.

Now for pushing the promise they may catch it in the neck, as Jesus did himself. They’re not to be afraid of this. They have God to count on as a child counts on the best of parents. They have Jesus in their corner. And here and there, among the strangers they’ll encounter, are some who will receive them, and show them kindness. It doesn’t need to be an extravagant kindness. “Whoever gives you so much as a cup of cold water in my name will be sure to get her reward.” So says Jesus at the end of chapter 10.

And in the great summing up of all that Jesus says—that’s the text you heard—we see how spectacular this reward turns out to be. That great seething mass of sheep and goats out there? That isn’t Jesus’ disciples, it isn’t you. Rather, it’s all the countless folks who don’t have any real clue who Jesus is or what he’s about. They’re the ones he sends you to for yet another year of faithful, dogged service as his representatives. “You showed my people a kindness, any kindness?” the King asks. “Come, join the party! Inherit the kingdom! Revel in the grace! Enjoy the plan that’s been in the works since before the

beginning!" How come? "Because whatever you did to the least of these my brothers, my sisters"—that's us he's talking about—"whatever you did for these my people," the King says, "you did to me."

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So let your baptized ears latch onto this tonight. What we have in this text is not what we thought we heard, the horrible threat of a hammer coming down. Instead we got a promise to lift us up and put some spunk up our spines. Christ has our backs. His protection plan is firmly in place as he sends us off to the work he has in mind for us this year. "Flash my credentials," he says. "Buck the trend of the times we're in. Do unto others as I keep doing to you. Gush with forgiveness. Take the risk of doing good in a world that celebrates evil. Treasure the forgotten, the ones that no one except for God gives a hoot about, however much they fake it. Wrap your arms around some sinners this year, including some serious sinners—a wretch or two you just can't stand. Turn that other cheek. Walk that extra mile. Love your enemies. Let your light shine. Do all this with high and holy confidence in the God who has not and absolutely will not give up on you." So says our Lord, the one who rules this year we're stepping into, whether people know it or not. A lot of them will hands down deny that such a thing could be. So what?

And yes, step one in all this is repentance. That's repentance as in getting our heads on straight; as in begging God the Holy Spirit to keep clearing our addled wits.

There is, for example, no point in piling up the stuff. Why would I, when I get to spend my days this year as a bona fide heir of the kingdom, that enduring age of grace and life that erupted with Christ from the tomb on Easter Sunday? Why not embrace the better fun by far of spreading the goodies around, if only by cracking open a few more envelopes and sending off a

lot more dollars. Or by taking a day, or two, or ten, to visit a nursing home, or to ladle some soup, or to sort some clothes, or to write to a convict; to do anything at all, whatever the risk or loss, to advertise the utter astonishment—the unseemly surprise—of that love of God we get to know and revel in through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Tonight, when I go to bed, be it before or after midnight, let me look in the mirror. You do the same. As we do, let’s make the sign of the cross, with plans to repeat it first thing in the morning.

We are Christ’s. The year is Christ’s. The world is Christ’s. Let’s live for him in 2020 as he lives for us.

In the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use
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