

Last Sunday of the Church Year – November 22, 2020

Text: Matthew 25:31–46

Theme: Something You Are, not Something You Do

Are you compassionate? I think people struggle with compassion. Most people think of compassion as feeling bad for people who are in crisis and trying to help them get out of their crisis. So, we give to the poor, house the homeless and feed the hungry and while those are all good things to do, are they compassionate? Webster says that the word means to feel sympathy for someone but, from its Latin roots, it means to suffer with someone. So, giving money that I didn't really need in the first place to a poor person is not really suffering with them. Digging the expired lima beans out of the back of the cabinet to give to the food pantry is not really suffering with the hungry is it? In fact, it's benefitting ourselves at the expense of some poor child who has to eat the lima beans that we didn't want.

The thing about compassion is that you cannot manufacture it. It is utterly impossible for a human being to create compassion, the willingness and desire to suffer with another human being. Even people who seemingly do it, may be doing it for the wrong reasons. I watched a documentary of a person who lived in the brothels of Calcutta to study the children of the prostitutes who lived there. People made a great deal of this person, the sacrifices she made, the lengths to which she went to help these children, but was it

compassion that motivated her? I don't know. She sold the documentary for a great deal of money and went back to her lovely flat in London. Maybe it was compassion and maybe it was just a way to make a living. Who knows, only God can see her heart.

God knows. On the last day, Jesus will come and separate the sheep from the goats. The sheep are those who have been washed in the blood of Jesus and are pure and therefore have compassion. Whatever they did, they did to glorify God. Maybe they fed the poor. Maybe they housed the homeless. Maybe they taught little children in Sunday school. Maybe they helped a developmentally disabled person to make a card for someone. Maybe they gave sacrificially to God's Church. Whatever they did, they did from the compassion that Christ had created in them.

Here's the thing that confuses us. The goats did much of the same stuff. Maybe the goats did even better stuff. Maybe they donated a million dollars to cancer research. Maybe they devoted their expertise to developing a program to combat homelessness. Maybe they taught Sunday School, and sang in the church choir and faithfully gave their 20 bucks every week but it doesn't matter. They did not do it out of compassion, but for some other reason. And why can I be so certain in saying that? Because they're goats. Goats are not washed in the blood of Christ. They have rejected the faith God

offers to grasp the Grace won for us on the cross. So, they have no ability to have real compassion. They might look compassionate but real compassion, the ability to suffer with others solely for the glory of God is beyond their ability. It is utterly impossible for them to do.

And, on that day, the last day when Christ has come to publicly judge the world, the goats will complain loudly as they always do! Lord when did we fail to show compassion to anyone? We had galas for the orphans! We served dinner at the soup kitchen! We gave thousands of dollars to your Church! Yet, compassion is never about what you have done. It is always about who you are. If you have been washed in the blood of Christ, you have compassion because you have died with him in baptism. You have suffered with him on the cross and you have risen with him from the dead to live a new life which you are living right now.

Right now, you are already a sheep. It is not that you do good in hopes that you will be judged a sheep on the last day. No, you have already been made a sheep and because you are already one of his sheep, you have compassion and everything you do in faith is a good work. In fact, when you feel guilt or shame, that feeling is your soul warning you that you are not behaving as who you are. When I was a little kid, I used to walk around in my brother's shoes. He was 14 years old and I was 5 years old and those shoes were like

boats on my feet but I thought it was great fun to walk around in them. But eventually my legs would get tired and my feet would hurt. My body would revolt against wearing shoes that don't fit. Likewise, our soul revolts when we live lives that don't fit. That's how it is when we act like a goat. It's like wearing the wrong size shoes and our soul gets tired and aches. Thank God we don't have to live that way any longer than we choose to do so.

Jesus gives us the opportunity to repent again and again. That is, we are invited to take off that smelly, dirty, ill-fitting goatskin and live as who we really are – sheep not goats. Jesus stands ready today and until the end of time to forgive us and love us because we have been made his sheep. So, take a moment right now to look in the mirror. If you're wearing a dirty, smelly, ill-fitting goat suit, take it off. Allow the waters of baptism to wash you clean and come to the altar and receive the holy body and blood of the one who died for you on the cross. Your wool will puff up and brighten like the sun and you will leave that itchy, ill-fitting, dirty goat suit behind. You are a sheep, not a goat. It's not something you do. It's something you are. Be who you are! You are a sheep because Christ drowned that dirty old goat in baptism. There's no need to wear his dirty, stinky skin anymore.