



“Do Nothing – or Nothing Doing”
Matthew 25:31-46
Christ the King, November 26, 2023
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“In my end is my beginning.”

We know this truth from the cycle of seasons, as we watch the remnant of brown leaves tumble to the ground and the earth’s plants and creatures prepare for winter and the new life that is to come.

We know this from the cross in the dying and rising of Jesus Christ, who bids us come and die so that we may know new life every day. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes in *The Cost of Discipleship*:

“As we embark upon discipleship we surrender ourselves to Christ in union with His death—we give over our lives to death. Thus it begins; the cross is not the terrible end to an otherwise god-fearing and happy life, but it meets us at the beginning of our communion with Christ.”

And here at the end of the church year in Matthew 25, we find ourselves turned back to the beginning—to the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus’ first act of ministry to his disciples. Back then, seated together on a hill in Galilee, they heard Jesus deliver the blessings that defined their call. These were so natural they didn’t think twice.

In the same way, when the disciples accepted the call to follow Jesus, none paused to think it through, or even to consult with their families. They just went. This call to obedience was not a contract, but the willingness to live joyfully in mercy without measure.

Now in Matthew 25 they are gathered on different hill, the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. In the Jesus’ teaching of the sheep and goats, the disciples hear the outcome of the decision they didn’t even realize they had made. We imagine them stunned and maybe a little taken aback to be singled out in this way. “We didn’t do anything. We were just living as you called us to live. If our living blessed others, well, that was a blessing to us.”

What they will also come to realize in the final drama of Jesus’ life is that this joyful living will take them to an unexpected place: Not only to the cross where their master will hang, just as he told them, but to the cross in all of human life. It will take them into all places of God’s suffering in the world.

This is what truly separates the sheep from the goats. We could follow the analogy of animal behavior – sheep are obedient and always follow, goats are stubborn and prone to going their own way. Sheep say yes, goats say no. But stubborn and independent-minded is not necessarily a bad thing. Just look at our granddaughter Callie, who charmingly fits that description.

The distinction between sheep and goats is more fundamental. The sheep embrace the reality of suffering because this is the reality of life on earth. Because they embrace this, they find

themselves perpetually in the messiness of life—feeding the hungry, tending the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the poor, visiting the sick and those in prison.

The goats reject the reality of life, because it threatens the false sense of security they have constructed to hide behind. But because Jesus IS life's ultimately reality, as the way, the truth, and the life, their rejection of him eventually catches up with them. Here they find they are sentenced to eternal punishment, while the sheep are embraced into eternal life.

As Christians we must affirm the truth that Jesus is the way and no other. While we acknowledge other faith traditions, in our own we find that those who reject Jesus Christ therefore reject humankind, for Jesus' love is for real human beings precisely where they are in the midst of life's messiness.

This is the stunning truth of our faith – that God loves us so much that he came down to be with us. We tell that story, we sing that story, but we cannot forget how earthshaking and unprecedented in all of cosmic history this was. God came down *for us* to die and to be raised into new life, a completely different kind of life, that we might have his face before us when we need it the most:

- In the hospital where you are trying to comprehend the terminal diagnosis your loved one has just received;
- At their bedside when they have drawn that last breath and passed into Jesus' arms;
- In the private viewing in the funeral parlor when you first see them laid out on a cold, hard table;
- In the emptiness of your home when you return after the funeral and all the guests have left, and you are beginning to panic as you wonder, "Now what?"
- Or in the midst of all those setbacks in life of which there are always so many, from your own illnesses and injuries to those of your children, when you pray that God would let the cup of their suffering pass to you – but it is not to be.

The grace of God is that, in the midst of all these, we become more aware, not less, of our Savior's presence and God's redeeming work through him. Each one of you who has been through these trials knows that to be true. This conviction not only sustains us but frees us to live fully in assurance of the eternal life, in the kingdom that God has prepared for us from the foundation of the world.

And here is the sad and terrible sentence for all those who have rejected Christ, those who had the same opportunity to follow Jesus but said "nothing doing": That this sustaining knowledge is concealed from them, so that there is no redeeming word in the midst of their trials and tribulations, but only judgment – their own. And their response? Not acts of mercy, but blaming, hate-filled diatribes, and streams of insults.

We too might be there if it were not for our Lord and Savior. For only he can enter into our own guilt, take it upon himself, and emerge as the sinless one.

Only through Christ can we become fully human. Only with him can we overcome what would otherwise overwhelm us. Amen.