

SUPPOSE YOU KNEW

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Grace Church in New York
The Last Sunday after Pentecost + Christ the King
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And the King will answer them, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me." (Matthew 25:40)

This day on the church calendar, and the Gospel reading we've heard remind me of a parishioner I knew years ago in the first church I served. Henry was an older man who would frequently take me to lunch, and once told me about a curious set of circumstances that he believed forever changed his life. In the late 1940's he was a struggling high school student with two possible paths before him: college and a career, or the draft and the infantry. With the Korean War looming, the latter was anything but desirable. The determining factor was shaping up to be a final examination in his physics class. Henry desperately needed to pass the exam in order to graduate, but his chances seemed remote. No matter how much he studied, no matter how much help he sought, the material eluded him.

As it happened, Henry's parents had a friend who was a physicist. This man, out of the goodness of his heart, agreed to tutor Henry on the day before the exam. In preparation for the tutoring, Henry brought home some physics books from the school library. When he and his tutor opened one of the books, they saw in a relevant chapter some faint check marks in the margins next to ten specific questions. Since these questions appeared to be good windows into the broader concepts that Henry needed to understand, the tutor used them as a framework for their study session. After three hours of working and reworking the questions they finally called it a night.

The next morning Henry dragged himself into physics class and focused his eyes upon the dreaded examination. To his utter astonishment, what came into view were the exact ten questions that he and his tutor had studied previous evening. Henry had done no dumpster diving, no scouring of his teacher's garbage can, nothing unethical at all to obtain the questions. He'd merely pulled a book from a library shelf without the slightest inkling that he held in his hands the source of the examination. Then with the help of a gracious tutor he'd studied the problems that were marked in the book. Henry still sweated through the final exam. When the grades came in, his was a C+. It was enough to pass. It was enough to graduate. He went to college. He signed up for the Air Force ROTC. He served in Japan, not Korea. Passing the physics exam changed the course of his life, perhaps even saved it.

Today is the Last Sunday after Pentecost, also known as Christ the King Sunday. On this last Sunday of the Christian year, we give expression to an unsettling Scriptural truth: class time will someday be over for all of humanity, and everyone who has participated in history will approach the judgment seat of Christ the King for a final examination. In the Gospel of Matthew (25:31-46), Jesus illustrated the great judgment with a parable. He chose a simple, pastoral scene that would have been entirely familiar to the people of his place and time. During the day shepherds watching over their flocks would have had both sheep and goats grazing together in the same field. But when the night began to fall, the sheep and the goats needed to go into different pens. The shepherd would stand at the gates and direct the goats this way, and the sheep that way. That's all you need take from this portion of the parable: two possible paths – goats to the left, sheep to the right.

Jesus then enlarged upon the simple scene to help us understand the judgment that will take place when the night finally falls on human history. Just as a shepherd easily separates his flock, so will Jesus easily distinguish the righteous from the unrighteous. Jesus minced no words. To the righteous the King will grant entrance into the kingdom of heaven. Why? Quite simply, because in

their time, the righteous were those who passed the test. They fed the hungry, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, and visited the sick and the prisoners. As for the unrighteous, the King will banish them to “the eternal fire prepared for the devil.” They failed the test. They did not feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, cloth the naked, or visit the sick and the prisoners. The parable is unyielding. We don’t like it. It certainly appears that what we have here is salvation by works of charity. All our talk about grace, and the forgiveness of sins, and faith in Christ, and God’s inexhaustible supply of love has been nice, but don’t trust it. Don’t let it fool you. You are at every moment undergoing the dreaded examination, and how you do will determine your eternal destiny. Will it be smoking, or non-smoking?

Is any grace to be found in the parable of the sheep and the goats? Is Jesus merely another king destined to disappoint? Today at the Offertory we’ll hear the choir sing Handel’s great coronation anthem, Zadok the Priest, with its thundering refrain, “*God save the king; long live the king.*” Handel wrote the piece for the coronation of King George II of England in 1727, and for his text he drew on the Scripture verses in I Kings that describe the anointing of King Solomon. The anthem mentions Solomon, and alludes to George II, and points to Jesus. It’s a lovely thought, but don’t trust it. Don’t let it fool you. Don’t let the magnificent music lull you into complacency. King Solomon of Israel proved to be a bitter disappointment. Likewise King George II proved himself to be no savior of the nation.

Is the reign of Jesus merely more of the same? I ask again: can we find any creative, saving grace in the parable of the sheep and the goats? I believe we can in abundance. I believe the grace is in the giving of the parable. I will say that again: the grace is in the giving of the parable. Many years ago, when my old parishioner Henry was in high school, he stumbled upon some physics problems marked in a book. These he studied without the slightest clue that he had the test before his eyes. Likewise in the parable, neither the righteous nor the unrighteous had the slightest clue that they’d had Jesus before their eyes all the time. The surprise of the righteous at the great judgment is like the surprise of Henry when he looked at the questions on his final exam. They didn’t have a clue. You and I do. You and I need not be surprised. We have the questions in advance. In fact, the parable runs through the list no less than four times for all of us wanna-be sheep.

Let me ask you this: suppose you had known one year ago, in November of 2019, what the economy would look like today, in November of 2020. Suppose you had known that a deadly pandemic would ravage the world, shut down businesses, throw millions out of work, and spark a desperate race for a vaccine. Suppose you had known one year ago. What would you have done – invest in Zoom, Pfizer, and Moderna? Nobody has such a crystal ball, but concerning the question of eternity the parable of the sheep and goats shows a fairly clear picture. It shows us two possible paths, one with more than a faint check mark next to it, but a big, blinking, neon arrow that says: THIS WAY. Suppose you knew the way. Suppose you knew that what you do to the least of God’s children, you do also to the King of glory. Suppose you knew what would be on the final exam. If you accept even a grain of God’s truth in the parable of the sheep and the goats, then you have to agree that we do know. The Christian faith is not about secret knowledge to be stumbled upon by a lucky few. It is about God’s making known his loving purposes in the creation, in the Word spoken through the prophets, and above all in the Word made flesh, Jesus. So it is with today’s parable. The grace is in the giving of it.

Well then, knowing what we know, it’s time to redirect our investments, isn’t it? It seems we had better get busy with the hungry, the homeless, and the prisoners. Correct? Be warned: to do so is to plunge into problems of infinite complexity. Among the mysteries you will encounter are the contradictions in your own soul, the hardness of your own heart, and the sustainability of your good intentions. In his letter to the Romans (7:18), St. Paul wrote, *I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.*

I can will what is right but I cannot do it. One Friday evening last summer I answered some incessant banging on the parish house door to find a family of three who claimed to be in desperate need of a place to stay for the night. I shared with them all the referrals we have for nearby shelters, but these were not what they wanted. They explained that they were in transit to another state and would be moving along in the morning. They asked if I could put them up in a hotel, if they could stay in the church, if they could camp on the rectory lawn. My answer to their every proposal had to be a polite no. Unfortunately, with each no the conversation was escalating in the wrong direction, and I began worrying how it was going to end. Eventually, after refusing everything I had to offer, including some food and water from my own kitchen, they cursed me out and moved on with their many suitcases.

Why was I unable to help them? I can run through a list to justify myself. I didn't trust their story. The timing of their arrival was suspicious. We're in the middle of a pandemic. The type of help we have to offer is designed to get people off the street, not spend another night on the street. But was the problem merely one of my own willingness? *I can will what is right but I cannot do it?* St. Paul's words aren't a perfect fit, because at other times I've been ready, willing, and able to lend a hand and still failed. I always leave my encounters with those on the margins hoping I've signed on as one of the sheep, but strongly suspecting that I've lined up with the goats. If I were being graded on the encounter, forget about a C+. I'd be lucky to pull down a D-.

Here is where I need to fall back on the forgiveness of sins, and faith in Christ, and God's inexhaustible supply of love, and the larger gospel stream that calls us not to be correct and successful, but loving and faithful. It helps me to remember my old friend Henry. Even with a tutor, even with what turned out to be the questions in advance, with all this he still sweated through the exam. Suppose that today's parable has given you and me the questions in advance. What we need is a tutor. What we need is the rich tradition of the church that has wrestled with the complexities of human nature for 2,000 years. What we need is the fellowship of each other for encouragement to try again and again, especially after we think we have failed. What we need is the Spirit of Christ – the Counselor – working within us that which is well pleasing in God's sight. If you are frustrated with the demands of this parable, I would say to you, "Join the club." I think Jesus meant for it to be unsettling.

One of the early Christians to wrestle with the parable of the sheep and the goats was John Chrysostom. John lived a long time ago, from 347-407. He was a priest and a monk and finally an archbishop. He could have a fiery temper that was ultimately his undoing, but he would use it to challenge the ruling powers and defend those in the margins. In one sermon he spoke words that cut to the quick, and can still tutor us today:

Suppose you knew that Christ is the tramp who comes in need of a night's lodging. You turn him away and then start laying rugs on the floor, draping the walls, hanging lamps on silver chains on the columns. Meanwhile the tramp is locked up in prison and you never give him a glance. Well again I am not condemning munificence in these matters. Make your house beautiful by all means but also look after the poor, or rather look after the poor first. No one was ever condemned for not adorning his house, but those who neglect the poor were threatened with hell fire for all eternity and a life of torment with devils. Adorn your house if you will, but do not forget your brother in distress. He is a temple of infinitely greater value.¹

Suppose you knew the questions in advance. Suppose this parable comes to us, to save our souls, ahead of time, while we still have time. Suppose you knew that what you do to one of the least of God's children, you do also to Jesus, the King of kings, and Lord of lords.

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¹ [From the Fathers to the Churches](#), Collins Liturgical Publications, 1985, p. 230.