

Christ the King, November 22, 2020
“Claiming Our Inheritance” (Matthew 25:31-46)

In our gospel text for today, Jesus is, once again, lifting up the theme of the end times. It is only a short time before his arrest and crucifixion, but he is confident of his coming victory over sin and death. He looks past his immediate future to the day when he will come again as King of all to judge the living and the dead. He indicates that on that great and final day all the nations of the earth will be gathered before him and he will separate the people much like a shepherd separates sheep from goats.

Jesus tells us that there will be two groups of people. But what will the two groups look like, and to which group will we belong? What, according to Jesus, is the deciding factor? With the Christmas season just around the corner, it is likely that some of us will soon watch some of the classic holiday movies. I want to use two of those classics this morning to illustrate the two different groups.

The first is *It's a Wonderful Life*. In this story, a man named George Bailey despairs that his life is so worthless that it would have been better if he had not been born at all. In order to prove him wrong, his guardian angel, Clarence, lets George experience what the world would have been like had the man, George Bailey, never existed. What George discovers is that his hum-drum life has affected far more people than he could have guessed. He finds that many of the little – and not so little – things he has done over the course of his lifetime have served to make his hometown of Bedford Falls a better place. George just never realized all the good he had done and all the bad he had prevented simply by being alive and by being himself.

In the second classic, *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens, the main character, Ebenezer Scrooge, is also unaware of the impact he has had on the lives of others. But his impact has not been so good. As a money-changer who has devoted his life to the accumulation of wealth, he holds anything other than money in contempt. When three ghosts visit him one Christmas Eve, he comes to realize how he has lived his life only for himself. He is unaware of how harshly he has treated people or how his actions and inactions have adversely affected the lives of others. He is warned that, unless he changes his ways, he will walk the earth eternally after death, invisible among his fellow men, burdened with chains, witnessing the misery and suffering he could have alleviated.

In both, the main characters have impacted the lives of others – for good or bad – but neither realize to what extent. Getting back to the two groups in our gospel text, whatever else might distinguish the two groups do share at least one thing in common: both have lived their lives without realizing something. One group has ministered directly to Jesus himself, while the other has essentially snubbed him. But neither is conscious of it. Those who ministered to Jesus are commended and welcomed into a pleasant sounding kingdom, while those who failed to minister to him are cast from his presence into the eternal fire.

But before that final separation, both groups – strangely enough – ask the exact same question: *Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty? When were you a stranger...or sick...or in prison?* Both groups are surprised that Jesus was among them and they didn't recognize him.

The reason they didn't see Jesus is because he identifies himself so closely with the hurting of this world. Therefore, whatever we do – or fail to do – in relation to those hurting people directly affects Jesus.

The sheep – or the George Bailey's – are surprised when Jesus says to them, *Come, you who are blessed by my Father and inherit the kingdom prepared for you.* They are surprised because they have forgotten their good works. It's as if they did them without even thinking about them and without any thought of reward or repayment. That's to say they did them selflessly. They simply saw a need, recognized they had the resources to help, and then assisted in whatever way they could. They ask, *Lord, when did we do those things?* And Jesus responds, *For just as you did works of charity, generosity, hospitality, and compassion for the least of the members of my family, you have done them to me.*

The other group – the goats or the Ebenezer Scrooge's – are surprised, as well, when Jesus says, *You who are cursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.* They are surprised because they don't remember ever having an opportunity to serve Jesus. But their forgetfulness isn't about what they've done for him, but about what they've left undone. They had overlooked Christ in his needy ones. Seeing no benefit to themselves, they selfishly displayed an uncaring, indifferent attitude to the hurting and suffering around them. These are the ones who refused to see another's need, or if they did see it, refused to part with any of their own resources for the benefit of the other. They simply turned their backs. They ask, *Lord, how is it possible that we didn't see you? Surely you know we would have helped if we had known it was you.* And Jesus responds, *For just as you failed to do works of charity, generosity, hospitality, and compassion for the least of the members of my family, you have failed to do them to me.*

Jesus makes it clear that when our lives include service, and ministry, and outreach to the downtrodden in life, then whether we know it or not, we are serving Jesus himself. But if our lives are all about meeting our own needs, looking out for number one, and doing little more than hoping that the poor, the hungry, the sick, the impoverished, the imprisoned will find their own way in the world, then we are insulting Jesus.

These words of Jesus do not point to some heroic life filled with magnificent or miraculous deeds. The kinds of ministries Jesus is highlighting are quite ordinary. He doesn't ask us to heal the sick, it's enough just look after them. He doesn't ask us to liberate those in prison, it's enough just to visit them. And the other items are matters of common sense and decency. If someone is hungry, we get him some food. If someone is thirsty, he needs a drink. And if someone is cold...he could use a coat. Jesus is not asking us to solve all the world's problems. But he does want us to look down our street or in our community to not only recognize the needs present there, but to offer ministry in those situations.

There will always be needs in our world. No matter what we do, no matter which party is in the White House, for whatever reason there will always be hungry, thirsty, ill-clad, homeless, sick, and imprisoned people. That's simply what's out there, and Jesus wants to know how we will

respond to them. It's an important question, one we're called to consider very carefully, because somehow, all those people are Jesus.

Now I want to say something about good works. At first glance, it seems that the George Bailey's are saved by their works. But we Lutherans are taught that good works don't save us; that our salvation comes not through what we do, but through what God has done for us through the death and resurrection of Christ. And that's true. The text for today even supports this. Look at what Jesus said to those who are blessed: *Inherit the kingdom prepared for you.*

Inheritance doesn't come because we've earned it. It doesn't come as payment for what we've done. Inheritance is a privilege of being a child – whether natural born or adopted. Inheritance speaks of grace, not obligation. Adopted as God's children in baptism, we are heirs with Christ; heirs to God's kingdom which was prepared for us before the foundation of the world.

Our inheritance of eternal life, then, is something that is passed along to us as sons and daughters of God. And that inheritance is sealed through the death of Christ. God makes this inheritance available to every one of us. It's just that some will accept this free gift of God's grace by putting their faith in Christ, while others will not. Good works, then, are the evidence or proof of our faith. The fruit we bear demonstrates that our faith is alive.

So, hopefully we can see how this separation of sheep and goats plays out. Those who are blessed are given that blessing because of their faith. They believe that Christ is their Savior. They trust that salvation is theirs by God's grace alone – and nothing more. Knowing they are free to live in God's grace, they naturally produce fruit; they want to do good works – all as a response to this gift. Their good works simply confirm their faith – showing that it is a living faith. We might also call this group the righteous ones – or the believers – because of the faith they display.

On the other hand, the unrighteous non-believers who are cursed are done so because of their lack of faith. They refuse the grace offered by God and do not believe that Christ is their Savior. This is why James, chapter 2, tells us that faith without works is dead. For him, the two cannot be separated. Good works are proof of our faith. That's how our faith is lived out. Therefore, when we fail to place our trust in Christ, we're not inclined to produce good fruit. If we haven't accepted God's grace and live every day in that grace, doing good works will not be our natural response. Instead, we'll think only of ourselves and will miss seeing Christ when we encounter him in the needy ones around us. So, in essence, our good works do accompany us to heaven, and God does recognize and acknowledge them. They don't save us, but they do provide evidence of the love of Christ dwelling in us.

The George Bailey's do not keep tally of their good works, but are forgetful of them, serving others with the selflessness of Christ. They live in every day in God's grace, trusting that God will provide for not only their needs, but for the needs of others.

The Ebenezer Scrooge's, having an interest only in themselves, see none of the needs around them. The absence of good works in their lives proves their lack of faith and trust in Christ.

So, to which group will we belong at the final judgment? The George Bailey's or the Ebenezer Scrooge's? May God's amazing grace open our eye to see what we might otherwise miss, so that at the end of time we might hear our King say, *Come, you who are blessed by my Father and inherit. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you. Amen.*