

Matthew 25.31-36

2nd-Last Sunday

15 November 2020

St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

+ INI +

Beloved in the Lord: Grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

There are three big truths that I hope everyone will leave with today, ones we often lose sight of or get confused about, and I've only got 9 minutes to do it in.

First, that the Lord Jesus will return. Second, that your good works are necessary. Third, that it's only the righteousness of Jesus laid on you in your Baptism—the righteousness of Another, and not of you—that saves you.

First, the Lord Jesus will return.

Our anxiety about His return grows with the day. Each day He doesn't come back to judge the living and the dead seems to make the reality of His promise to do it fade away.

You're not alone in this. The Christians St. Peter wrote to in his letters were worried about it, as well. And he comforted them with these words from the Psalm, "With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day." What's a long time for you isn't for God, who in His eternal view of things takes in the whole sweep of history in one glance. Even your doubts about His return. And He promises to cut the time short for the sake of His elect, so that no one will be able to snatch them from His hand.

And that's just how Jesus put it when He was speaking to His disciples here in Matthew 25. Notice that there's no hedging. He doesn't say that the Son of Man might return. He doesn't say, "If the Son of Man returns." He says, "When the Son of Man returns."

Beloved in the Lord: keep up your courage. Jesus hasn't left you orphaned. He is returning. And when He returns He will rescue you from this present evil age. From all sins. From death. And not even the power of the devil will be withstand His power to save.

That's the first point. The Lord Jesus will return.

The second big truth is this. Your good works are necessary. They're even seen by the Lord Jesus. And for them you'll be commended on the great and final day.

But that doesn't mean you should be anxious about them. In fact, quite the opposite. Look at how the sheep at the Lord's right hand react to the Lord's praise of their good works. They don't even recall doing them!

So how does this all work out?

My family and I make frequent trips to see our extended families in Minnesota and Wisconsin. We pile into the car early in the morning and arrive sometime late in the afternoon or early evening. It's a long trip. And all we can think about is getting there. Our eyes aren't on what we're doing right now; they're on the goal: getting to Mankato because she's a Schweim or Milwaukee because I'm a Bruss and that's just what Schweims and Brusses do.

When we show up, we're not looking forward to telling everyone about every grueling minute of the drive. In fact, we're not even thinking about it. We're thinking about the hugs and the kisses and the catching up. Of course, we knew what we had to do to get there. We had to wake up early. Make appropriate pit stops. Stay awake in on I-35 north of Des Moines, the boringest stretch of Interstate in the whole land. We had to fill up with gas and watch it so we didn't run out. We had to keep eyes on the road and the pedal to the metal. We had to avoid collision.

The last thing we'd expect to hear when we arrived was, "Nice job!" Nor did we drive the distance to hear that. The only reason we went was because that's what Schweims and Brusses do.

That's how your good works are. You do them only because you know who you are—a creature of God made to serve your fellow human beings; a redeemed child of God, whose sins can never stick the blood shed for your sins back in the veins of Jesus; a baptized child of God made to walk in newness of life and whose sins have been rinsed away in that gracious washing. You do them not to get praised when you show up. You don't count up every good deed. In fact, you don't even really think about the one you're doing. It's just what you do because that's what the baptized do.

But those works are necessary. The Lord Himself uses them as His own mask. He hides behind them. And brings good things for His creation through them. He's overjoyed to see the small help you give to a destitute woman at the Dollar General. He loves to see His creation at work in alleviating pain, feeding the hungry, visiting the lonely. Because when you do that, He's doing it. That's what it means when He tells the sheep that they did it unto Him.

So your good works are necessary. Never let a Lutheran pastor—or any pastor—tell you otherwise. But only remember who you are—a redeemed, baptized child of God. That is, focus on Christ alone and His Word. The good works you're to do He's already prepared for you in your vocation.

That's the second big truth.

The third big truth is this. No matter how valuable your good works are in this life—and they are: one word that builds up is worth more than a ton of silver. One small work of love that supports the property, reputation, marriage, and life of others is worth more than a ton of gold. And one work that hallows and proclaims God's name and builds up the Body of Christ on earth is worth more than a ton of platinum. But no matter how valuable your good works are in this life, they have no value in the question of what you are—sheep or goat.

There, in that question, only one thing matters—and that's faith in the heart. Faith not as an optimistic outlook on life, a sort of hope for a better tomorrow. The pagans can do that, for crying out loud. But faith in the holy birth, the great good works, the undeserved suffering, the unjustified death, the victorious resurrection and holy ascension of Jesus Christ.

You see, the goats—they tried to do what's impossible for a goat to do. They tried to make themselves sheep by what they did. But born goats, goats they remain.

The same goes with the sheep. The sheep are born as sheep—born from above. Born in the water of Holy Baptism. Kept in the fold through the sweet voice of the Good Shepherd. Fed in the pen of the holy church with no mere fodder, but with the Holy Body and Blood of the Good Shepherd. Sins forgiven. Wrapped up in the woolly coat not of their own righteousness but in the crimson coat of the holiness of Jesus. Protected within the walls of the pen, the holy church, from every predation of the devil and the world. And healed by the medicine of the Good Shepherd from all the wounds of their own sinful flesh. A goat is a goat is a goat. But a sheep is a child of God through baptism, kept firm and steadfast in

Christ's Word and faith until he dies. And just as the goats are separated off to the left just because they're goats and in spite of the good they plead, so the sheep are pulled to the Lord's right hand just because they're sheep, and not because of their many good works.

So, fellow-redeemed: You are sheep. Eyes on Jesus and His Word. The good works will follow automatically. Spontaneously. And they're needed. But for this life only. And not for you, but for your neighbor.

And with your eyes on Jesus, be courageous, for He will return to judge. Don't worry about when. It will be just the right time. And to you He will say, "Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." And your enemies—sin, death, and world? Well, they'll depart with the goats into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

Amen.

pax dei, etc.

jsb
sdg