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Proper 29, Year A
The Last Sunday after Pentecost, "Christ the King"
20 Nov. 2011
St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Port Townsend, WA

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24
Psalm 100
Ephesians 1:15-23
Matthew 25:31-46

Living in Relationship
by
Margaret D. McGee

Think back to your school years. Remember the day when report cards came out? Was it a big deal at your home? Or was it more casual—like, if it looked like the kids were gonna make it to the next grade level, all was good?

When I was growing up and school report cards came out, I had the great privilege of receiving a personal interview about my grades with the superintendant of the school system. My father. At the McGee family home, no report card ever passed without comment. The interview was all together a solemn occasion.

I usually got pretty good grades. Still, even a B+ could be discussed.

My dad made it clear that he didn't expect his kids to get all A's, all the time. At some point in the discussion, he was sure to say, "Well, as long as you did your best. That's all we ask. Just do the best you can."

I think the superintendent probably meant those words in a positive and supportive way, but, for me, as elementary school turned into junior high, then high school, those very assurances became the hardest part of the whole interview.

He'd ask, "Did you do your best?" and I'd answer, "I guess," because I couldn't say out loud the questions flooding through my mind.

"What is my best? What is that? Sometimes at school, I daydream during American History class. Sometimes at home, I sprawl out on the couch and read comic books. In fact, I do that as much as possible. Am I 'doing my best'? When it comes to studying, can't you always do more?"

A little window into Margaret's soul.

So you can imagine my feelings on encountering today's gospel reading, The Day of Judgment.

Our passage this morning comes at a turning point in Jesus's life and ministry, just as we are at a turning point now, in the church's liturgical calendar. Today is the final Sunday of the church year. This week of Thanksgiving we are turning, turning toward Advent and the coming of the Christ child.

All through this section of Matthew's Gospel that we have been following in the past weeks, we see Jesus turning, turning toward his own trial and Day of Judgment in the Roman courts. In the very next

verse after today's reading, Jesus tells his disciples that, within the week, the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.

So that's the context of our Gospel reading this morning, which starts with the Son of Man *sitting on his throne of glory*. In this scene, he is not the one on trial; he's the Judge, separating the sheep (those who are blessed and who inherit God's kingdom) from the goats (those who are accursed and destined for eternal fire.)

Every time I read or hear this passage, the first thought that pops into my mind is: *Am I a sheep? Or am I a goat? And ... how would I know?*

Now in this case, the judge on the throne does not say, "Well Margaret, did you do the best you could?" That doesn't seem to be the question. In fact, the judge doesn't ask any questions. He just describes how the sheep and the goats have lived in relationship with each other. And this Judge seems particularly interested in how they lived in relationship with other sheep and goats who are hurting in one way or another. Because the ones who suffer, the ones who need help, these are the very ones that this Judge identifies with so closely, it's like they are the same person.

"For I was hungry, and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."

That's what he says to the sheep. The goats, evidently, behaved differently toward the vulnerable, hurting members of the family of the Son of Man.

So okay. I read these words, and I'm still asking myself whether I'm a sheep or a goat? If this is a test, do I pass or fail? And just like I never know whether I've done my best, I can't tell whether I end up on the right hand or the left.

I mean, sure, I've fed a few people. I've donated some clothes. When I meet someone new, I try to be friendly. But I sure know plenty of people who've done plenty more than me along those lines. And not just theoretical far off people either, like Mother Theresa, or Bono. No, I mean I actually know some pretty amazing people when it comes to feeding, caring for, and visiting.

Which sends my imagination right back to those report card discussions, and the imaginary Judge asks, in a voice remarkably like my father's, *"Well, did you do the best you could?"* Who knows?

This is a difficult, and scary reading.

What saves it, for me—what in the text itself saves me from the abyss—is when I finally notice that, according to Matthew, nobody else in this courtroom knows where they belong either. Neither the sheep nor the goats have a clue how they end up on the judge's right or left hand.

"When was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food?" asks the sheep. The goats ask, *"When did we ever see you in trouble and not take care of you?"*

If we put ourselves right in and amongst this flock of clueless ruminants, then it becomes clear that any doubt and fussing about 'Am I a sheep or a goat?' is just wasted energy. It's not our job to know who's

on the right and who's on the left, not about ourselves or anybody else. In this courtroom, we are not the judge. (*Sigh of relief.*)

So then, on the other side of that dichotomy of the sheep vs. the goats, it becomes possible to focus on what this judge is really judging. Which seems to be, how did you live your life in relationship to other people? Not compared to how Mother Theresa lived her life. This is not a test, and the judge is not grading on the curve. Rather it seems to be a very one-on-one thing for the Judge. You saw me hungry, and you fed me. If you didn't recognize me, well, that's because you were feeding a member of my family. And to me, says the Judge, there's no difference between me and a member of my family.

It turns out that this judge has a really big family, and they are all hurting in one way or another.

Once we can get past the distracting separation between the sheep and the goats, then all of a sudden we are in a world devoted to breaking down whatever separates us, one from the other. Whatever isolates anyone from the human family. The stranger is welcomed. The sick, the prisoner are not alone, but are cared for and visited. When we co-create and live in that world, it turns out, there is nothing to fear, because we are living in the presence of our God.

It is in this world—where someone who's hungry isn't a threat to my own supper, but a family member with a seat at the table—it's in this world that we have a chance to escape from our own damnable isolation and break bread every day with our Savior. With the One who heals wounds and who *gathers* the *sheep* who *have been scattered* in *thick darkness*.

As Ezekial tells us, this is the nature of our God, a God who says, *“I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out.... I will rescue them ... I will feed them on the mountains [and] by the watercourses ... I will seek the lost ... I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak ... but the fat and the strong ... [the ones who shove the more vulnerable members of my flock to one side—they won’t do so well.] I will feed them [all] with justice.”*

In describing the day of judgment, yes, Jesus issues a warning – a scary warning – and yet, wrapped up in this warning, it seems to me he also presents a way of life that’s full of opportunity. Not one single final exam, pass or fail, but a continuing stream of opportunity that presents itself day by day, moment by moment, age by age.

The opportunity to live as one with the whole human family. To sit at the same table with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the one who is sick, or imprisoned, and to share in one meal out of God’s abundance, starting with the assurance that we are all members of the same clan—all sheep of the same fold.

Ezekial’s vision of our God, the One who gathers the scattered sheep and feeds them by the watercourses, this intermingling of vulnerability, generosity, kindness, and abundance brings to mind the writings of Hildegard of Bingen, a Benedictine abbess who lived in the 12th Century and wrote theological works that present the Creative force as a green, moist, and flowing presence on earth.

Hildegard wrote, “God’s soul is the wind rustling plants and leaves, the dew dancing on the grass, the rainy breezes making everything to grow. Just like this, the kindness of a person flows,

touching those dragging burdens of longing. We [can] be a breeze helping the homeless, dew comforting those who are depressed, the cool, misty air refreshing the exhausted, and with God's teaching we have got to feed the hungry. This is how we share God's soul."

This is the opportunity that comes today, tomorrow, and everyday: a way of living with Jesus. Thanks be to God.

Ref: Hildegard of Bingen, *Hymn* – from *A Little Daily Wisdom* by Carmen Butcher, p. 195, as quoted on the blog "*Spiritually Directed*."