

Psalms 95:1-7a

Ephesians 1:15-23

Matthew 25:31-46

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Irene Pak Lee

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## **When Was It?**

Well friends, as we come into this time of the Word proclaimed together, I want to name and acknowledge that it's kind of an awkward and hard day. For those of you who are wondering why, this past Tuesday, Session made the difficult and right decision to move to a one senior pastor model. I'm the associate pastor here at Stone, and so by making this decision, it does mean that I'll be leaving you all sooner than maybe any of us imagined. I think it's important for me to say out loud and to name that this is really hard but it was also not a surprise to me. This is the right decision for Stone Church, even if you don't think so. I'm not going to stand here and pretend that this doesn't come with pain and grief for me too because it does. And yet, I want to acknowledge that your Session is moving with courage and hope for the future and I am too. I do not have anything lined up so we are all taking a huge leap of faith right now. But it's going to be okay. I think. J Maybe I should say, I believe all will be okay, because that, I know. (deep in here).

Because I'm living this unknown future with you, I also know that anxiety or an anxious system sometimes makes us all feel like we need to rush, to hurry and reach a quick conclusion. Anxiety makes us feel like the sky is falling, that this is some kind of step into decline, but friends, the life of the church was never about me or a pastor. The life and hope of the church is and always will be Jesus the Christ, and so today, on this Reign of Christ or Christ the King Sunday, even in the midst of real sadness, grief, and loss, we are proclaiming that Christ reigns.

In our gospel reading today from Matthew, this passage presents an idea of kingship and reign that is hard to hear. It begins with this glorious image of the Son of Man, all the angels with him, sitting on a throne of glory. All the nations gather before him, and then this separation happens. Those that are blessed and those that are accursed, scripture tells us. One side and another. Sheep and goats. Interestingly, the requirements that were fulfilled or unfulfilled are the same: 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."

“I was hungry and you gave me no food, thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink. I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.

And Jesus replies to both groups, it was when you did it for the least of these; it was when you did not do it for the least of these.

What struck me the most in my reading of this passage is not the judgment itself. I know it's hard not to focus on the judgement part but think about it. What's striking in this passage and quite frankly freaks me out is the response of both the sheep and the goats: WHEN WAS IT? When was it?

Both the sheep and the goats have NO idea the impact they had in their lifetimes. Both are surprised by this proclamation made upon them. The sheep weren't like, “Yeah, that's right goats, take that! I was right and you were wrong.” The goats are astounded to hear that they did not welcome and feed and offer drink to the one surrounded by angels. Neither of them consciously knew **when** they had extended grace, mercy and hospitality to Christ. “When was it?” they both ask.

I don't know about you, but this makes me super uncomfortable.

It makes me uncomfortable because I do not want to be surprised like that when I am one day standing before God. If you grew up going to church and depending on your church background, I'm guessing that for a majority of us, we were taught that there were explicit ways to behave, act, or not act...you know, to be considered “good” Christians who were going to heaven. There was a set list of rules to abide by. Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber refers to it as the sheep-behavior management program, which meant that you were to dress a certain way, talk a certain way and avoid certain things like swearing, drinking, dancing, gambling, and above all else, sexual impurity. What she also says is all the fun stuff. J

So I want to ask you this morning, how many of you like me heard a list like that growing up associated with how to be a “good” Christian? (raise hand). I know I'm not the only one.

Interestingly, none of those requirements talked about giving food and drink to someone who needs it or welcoming the stranger or giving clothes or visiting the sick and those in prison...and yet **this** is the criteria Jesus explicitly names. This still makes me nervous. It's not the criteria that makes me uncomfortable. I like the explicit instructions. I want a list to write down and check off. Jesus is clear. So even if we did not grow up hearing those guidelines, we are hearing them now. What makes me nervous is again, that neither the sheep nor the goats knew when they

were doing it and when they were not. So, if I wanted to cross those things off my to-do list, basically I won't always know it. I cannot boast about doing those things. Instead, I just have to keep showing up, keep trying, keep engaging, continue learning and extending welcome, even if I will never know what kind of impact it has.

Friends, I believe this is the message that we need to cling to in these uncertain days. We have to keep showing up, keep trying, keep engaging, continue learning and extending welcome, feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, we need to clothe the naked and visit those that are sick and visit the prisoner. I know it is hard to do those things when you're living in anxious spaces.

I mentioned earlier about how being in an anxious and unknown time tends to make people-us-rush to answers and hurry toward a conclusion. In the 1970s, two Princeton social psychologists Dan Batson and John Darley conducted an experiment on time pressure and helpful behavior. They studied how seminary students at Princeton Theological Seminary would conduct themselves when asked to deliver a sermon on the Good Samaritan story-you know-when the 3 walk by an injured man alongside the road and the two you expect to help do not and the enemy/outsider does.

The students were tasked to write a sermon on this passage and deliver it in a building across campus to be evaluated by their professors. Batson and Darley were curious about whether time pressure would affect the seminary students' helpful nature. Remember, these are folks training to become ministers about to preach about helping someone hurt on the side of the road so the assumption was that they would be inclined to help when encountering someone in need.

As each student finalized their preparation in a classroom, the researchers put a time constraint upon them by giving them one of three instructions:

The first one was: "You're late. They were expecting you a few minutes ago...You'd better hurry over. It shouldn't take but just a minute." This was the *high-hurry* condition.

The second was: "The (studio) assistant is ready for you, so please go right over." This was the *intermediate-hurry* condition.

The third was: It'll be a few minutes before they're ready for you, but you might as well head on over. If you have to wait over there, it shouldn't be long." This was the *low-hurry* condition.

As each student walked alone from the preparation classroom to the studio where they were going to be evaluated, they had to walk past a 'victim' in a deserted alleyway just like the wounded traveler in the parable of the Good Samaritan. This victim (actually a colleague of the experimenters) appeared destitute, was slouched and coughing and clearly in need of assistance. The seminarians were thus offered a chance to apply what they were about to preach.

Can you guess what happened?

The ones in the high hurry situation where they felt pressed for time and were told they were late? Only 10 percent of those students stopped to help. About 45 percent of the students in the intermediate hurry situation stopped to help and 63 percent of the students in the low-hurry situations helped the victim.

The researchers concluded that it's actually conflict, rather than callousness, that explained the failure to stop to help. They concluded: "A person not in a hurry may stop and offer help to a person in distress. A person in a hurry is likely to keep going. Ironically, the person is likely to keep going even if they are hurrying to speak on the parable of the Good Samaritan, thus inadvertently confirming the point of the parable... Thinking about the Good Samaritan did not increase helping behavior, but being in a hurry *decreased* it."

Friends, I know I'm mixing scripture lessons here but it helps us perhaps understand both the sheep and goat response of "When was it?" And it frames one thing that might get in the way of our own response. That even in anxious times, we need to slow down and still BE the Church.

And so Church, perhaps that's the challenge for us this morning. I do not think this passage is really about trying to be a sheep or trying not to be a goat and categorizing ourselves or others into these groups. That's not our task. In fact, we do not need to care who the sheep or the goats are at all. Instead we need to focus on continuing to live out our faith even and perhaps especially in anxious times. To trust the journey God has placed us on, even if we cannot see all of it. To not rush and hurry even with our good intentions but instead to take it one step at a time so that the call to extend justice and compassion and mercy continues to be an extension of who we are. Our end goal is not to "get into heaven" but to transform

our world here and now. Because according to this lesson, we are not going to know who stands on the right or left anyway. What we do know is that Christ tells us where to find him. We cannot do that if we feel rushed or anxious. We do that when we remember the story and slow down and trust that we are not alone, that God has not abandoned us, and that God is and always will be faithful to us.

And so friends, let us ask ourselves, who among us is crying out for justice that historically did not have power or voice? What are they saying to us? Are we really listening? Are we centering their cries or are we centering our own to fit what we think is needed? Who do we pay attention to, and why? Why not?

Again, Nadia Bolz-Weber writes, “See, the ones in the story who fed the hungry and clothed the poor and welcomed the stranger did not do these things in order to inherit the kingdom...there were totally surprised when Jesus said that when they did this to the least of these they did it to him. Because, righteousness was not a motive, it was a result.”

And so friends, my invitation to you is not to get caught up in trying to ensure you’re a sheep and not a goat. Instead, do the inner work you need to do this week, asking yourself the hard questions, framing yourself and your compassion for those Jesus names here. Can you grow that compassion? Can you practice showing up, trying to engage, even if it does not feel like you’re getting results? Can you slow down and meet Christ even in the unknown?

Can you do this even in the midst of change and transition? Will you? Will I?

Because one day, all of us will ask, “Jesus, when was it?”

And friends, until that final day, we may never know. But keep showing up, keep learning and growing and even if the road takes us down different paths, let us journey together to care for the sick, feed the hungry, visit the prisoner, clothe the naked and welcome the stranger. And may the God in Christ that shows up in the most vulnerable among us... may this Christ reign. And all God’s people say, Amen.