

# “Sermon for Reign of Christ Sunday” by Teresa L. Ramsey

November 26, 2017



## Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Scripture: Matthew 25:31-46, Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24, Psalm 80:1-17, 17-19, Ephesians 1: 15-23

Good morning Seekers Family. This is the last Sunday of the church year and is known as known as the reign of Christ Sunday. Next Sunday, Advent starts (so soon, right?) and we begin year B in the lectionary.

Today, as our church year ends, we look at the role of Jesus Christ in the last judgement. In our gospel reading from Matthew, he describes what Jesus said about the last judgment using the parable of the sheep and the goats. This parable is the last of several parables about the return of Jesus after he ascends to heaven. In the immediate preceding weeks, we read from Mathew those other parables about Jesus' return such as the parable of the ten virgins, the parable of the two sons, and the parable of the talents for example.

In the parable we read today, Jesus warns that there is a judgment to come and he will be the judge. He will separate people into two groups just like the shepherds of his day separated sheep and goats at the end of the day. As a historical note, sheep and goats were often pastured together during the day but were separated at the end of the day and placed in different enclosures to protect the sheep from the more aggressive goats. Jesus goes on to relate that the people who are identified as the "sheep" would inherit the kingdom and eternal life and those identified as the "goats" would be cast out. The division appears to be based on the acts of kindness and mercy done for other, disadvantaged people whom Jesus identifies with himself. This parable addresses the big question of who goes to heaven and why.

Great subject, right? But this parable raises many more questions than it answers. To prepare for today, I consulted the analysis of this parable by various bible scholars, but it didn't help. They offered no clear, consistent take. About a month ago a more scholarly Seeker was faced with a difficult reading and chose to side-step a troublesome passage. I will not do that, but will instead illustrate the adage that fools rush in where angels fear to tread. I invite you along.

There is so much about the mystical realm that is not clearly disclosed to us. Certainly, we observe the workings of various underlying laws of universal application, but many other such laws are not known. One thing we can be certain of, however, is that of our mission in this life. We can be certain because Jesus tells us straight out that we are to love God and love our fellow man.

In the parable of the sheep and the goats we learn about what loving God and man looks like.

Today I wish to share my thoughts on this parable with you from my perspective as a recovering alcoholic. I base my comments on my own experience with the God of my

understanding, who is a loving God. Oh, first I should explain why I chose to call God "He" lest it be a distraction.

You see, I never knew who my biological father was, so by calling God He and Father I am reminded that I am not without a father and not a victim. I need this reminder. For those of you who prefer another appellation, please insert the pronoun of your choice.

To summarize today's parable: there is a judgement to come in which every man and woman will be sentenced to either happiness or misery. At present, the wicked and godly dwell here together in the same city, the same family, the same churches perhaps, and we don't know who is who. At death, all other distinctions will be done away with but the one between saints and sinners, holy and unholy will remain. People will be separated into the two camps like sheep were separated from the goats at the end of the day. The saints (sheep) will inherit happiness, but the wicked (goats) will be cast out. All are invited but each must choose. Okay then, who doesn't want to be a sheep? How does one choose to be a sheep and not a goat, then, becomes a very important question.

But before we get to that question, there are a few other questions that need examination. First, when does the reign of Christ start? There is some scholarly debate over whether Christ's reign began with the resurrection itself or whether it is to begin with the second coming. I have no way to weigh in on that. I do know when Christ began to reign over me, which is when I surrendered my thoughts and actions to the care of God of my understanding or rather the God of my misunderstanding. I say my misunderstanding because God is mystical and mysterious. As an aside, I am in the class on the Book of Job offered by the School for Christian Growth and enjoy studying how much has been invested over time in trying to figure out how God works and discard our ideas of how we think God should work. In AA I learned not about God himself but about why I need God. I also learned there that each of

us encounters God differently. Kind of like the poem of the seven men and the elephant except there are millions of permutations. I don't know how it works and can't explain it further.

Now, I am aware that there are fellow pilgrims who experience God as a great universal energy, or design, rather than a personal God. I respect the beliefs of others. However, my own experience of God is very personal and shaped by what I learned in AA and what I have seen manifested in myself and others. In my experience, the words of Bill Wilson are true that "deep down in every man, woman, and child, is the fundamental idea of God. It may be obscured by calamity, by pomp, by worship of other things, but in some form it is there.....We found the Great Reality deep down within us. In the last analysis it is only there that He may be found. It was so with us." [\[1\]](#) So it is with me also, that I experience an in-dwelling God, a personal God, with whom I communicate and who directs my thoughts and actions if I am willing. No, I don't hear voices and yes, I sometimes miss the guidance in the noise of the world and the noise my own thoughts make, but through prayer and meditation I am increasingly aware of God's intuitive guidance, how he manifests through other people and in synchronicity, and scripture. I try to choose on a daily, sometimes hourly or moment-by-moment basis to surrender to the reign of Christ over me. We get this choice, I believe, as long as we live.

Another aside: Few people who are not members of AA understand that the purpose of AA is not not drinking but is to find a spiritual solution to the underlying spiritual disease that drives a person to drink. The solution lies in establishing a relationship with God and by continuing to enlarge one's spiritual life. The big book of Alcoholics states that its main object is "to enable you to find a Power greater than yourself which will solve your problem." [\[2\]](#) I can say that I have found that power within me and God as its source. Why

did I not experience God within me before? Because I didn't look there and because I blocked the sun light of the spirit by resentment, fear and resistance. Sometimes I still revert, and block God and the result is the same, it feels like God has abandoned me but in truth I have locked Him out (temporarily).

Today's gospel raises for me a second question which is how I can be a sheep and not a goat? The message of this parable is that to be a sheep I must treat other people with love. Jesus places so much importance on the way that we treat other people because it is a visible sign of our relationship with God. We show love for God by showing love to others, the two great commandments. Jesus identifies the poor, the needy, and the strangers with himself. By neglecting charity, we show that we do not have his spirit. To be fit for heaven, one must have his spirit. Paul puts it this way in today's epistle, "I keep asking that God of our lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation so that you may know him better." Ephesians 1: 17. If we know and follow Jesus, we show it by our actions. We know as Christians that Jesus has secured heaven for us, that we don't "earn" it, yet to attain heaven we must have his spirit. If one has the spirit of Jesus then one would feed the hungry, clothe the naked and so on.

The third question that today's gospel reading raises for me is about being cast from God's presence for not acting with love towards others. Notice that Jesus does not say that only positive sin (murder, adultery, etc.) condemns us but rather a lack of charity condemns us. Jesus also does not say that faith in Jesus is necessary to receive the reward of saints. I know this may be controversial but if you read this passage carefully, Jesus is concerned about carrying out the mission of love as demonstrated by actions consistent with love.

Now we come to another tricky part. Jesus instructs that failure to carry out the mission of love condemns us and if we

are condemned we will be cast into "hell". Having been raised Catholic, I heard a lot about hell and the devil. The avoidance of hell seemed to be almost all we focused on. This hell was the hell of cartoons, flames, devil horns, etc. As I grew up, the boogey-man hell ceased to scare me. Yet, today I have a much deeper fear.... The fear of being cast out. I fear more than anything that I will be separated from the presence of God. I know that when I push God away by fear or anger, that my own suffering is immense. This suffering happens when I don't "feel" God even though He is still here within me.

The dark night of the soul experience that we all have from time-to-time. What if God turned away from me forever? Never would I know again the love and comfort of my creator, my sustainer, my redeemer. A crushing blow beyond all blows. Why even exist? The pain would be incomprehensible. I share the sentiment that was expressed by Bill Wilson, the founder of AA, that "the consciousness of the Presence of God" is today that most important fact" of my life.[\[3\]](#)

When I am conscious of the Presence of God I am joyful. When I lose that consciousness, I am in pain. Heaven to me would be a total consciousness of the presence of God. Hell would be the total absence of God combined with the knowledge that this would not change.

Today, I can, then, experience a foretaste of heaven and hell while still on earth. I can increase my God consciousness through prayer and meditation, through seeking God's direction for my thoughts and my actions, through right relations with my fellows, through the scriptures and other spiritual readings, through moving out of the way and inviting God's love to flow through me, by being of service to God and others, by listening to the spiritual giants I encounter on the road to happy destiny (some of whom are in this very room) and by carrying out the mission of love. As we say in AA, simple but by no means easy. Christ can reign now within you, you need not wait.

In summary, let the reign of Christ continue, let it be so within you, carry out your mission on earth which is to love, and enjoy the sunlight of the spirit now. I wish to end with a prayer from verse 19 of Psalm 80:

“Restore us, O Lord God Almighty, make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved.” Amen.

[\[1\]](#) Id at Page 55.

[\[2\]](#) Id at Page 45.

[\[3\]](#) Alcoholics Anonymous, Fourth Edition, Page 51.