

Last Sunday in the Church Year, November 19-20, 2011

“Question Mark”, Matthew 25:31-46

It was tough week the week before last. I had one good friend of mine find out he had a brain tumor, and then the same week a Pastor buddy of mine and seminary classmate was killed in a single engine plane crash. Earlier that same week on Wednesday morning I found myself at the bedside of Roger Paetzel as the family made the tough decision to disconnect life support. As we watched the monitor with Roger's vital signs growing weaker and weaker a QUESTION MARK appeared where his blood pressure once was...a QUESTION MARK on the monitor? It was almost as if the monitor did not want to commit or draw any conclusions too quickly. Death is one of those five letter words we do not like to talk about. How appropriate, I thought to myself...a lot of people have questions when it comes to “end of life” issues. Though we are confident where Roger is today, many have questions about death and judgment. As I was leaving the hospital I was thankful to have actually been there to see a “baptized believing Christian” take the hand of God. Still, when many others in similar situations see that QUESTION MARK on that monitor, there is fear! Without God, death can be fearful...without knowing the Savior, what hope do we have in death? For those who have no relationship with Jesus I suppose they are just rolling the dice, hoping for the best. In such situations monitors with vital life readings should have a QUESTION MARK as judgment approaches. But before that QUESTION MARK should be the words, “Do you know the Savior who loves you?”

Today's Gospel lesson confronts us with this question, “Am I a sheep or a goat?” On this, the Last Sunday of the Church Year, Jesus speaks about what happens when the world as we know it comes to an end. Jesus is speaking about Judgment, the day when every man, woman, and child's eternal destiny will be decided. Jesus talks about a time when all we value in the world will not mean a thing. The only thing that will matter is what side of Jesus I will be on – on His left as a goat, or on His right as one of His sheep.

And the thing that is scary is that those on His left, the goats, will they be shocked to find out that they are even on the left...that they are listed among the goats? They had no clue that they would end up as a goat. In life they never took the time to notice. They lived for themselves and never saw the face of human suffering or the need for a Savior. When Jesus says to them, “Depart from Me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels”, they are absolutely blown away. Buy why Lord? (QUESTION MARK) How can this be Lord? (QUESTION MARK) Wasn't I a good person? (QUESTION MARK)

You see, when Jesus comes again He will not come as the kindly servant king riding humbly on the donkey...Jesus will no longer be the suffering Messiah who remains silent before His accusers on a cross. Instead, Jesus will be Judge and King who simply divides the sheep from the goats. The days of grace and mercy will be over! No more second chances, no more time to repent. The first time Jesus came to earth, He came seeking to save that which was lost, but when Jesus comes the second time, He will come in judgment.

It is a scary thought to think of ourselves as being among the goats. It's scary because we all have doubts, because we recognize ourselves as sinners who have neglected to do the good works God desires. It's scary because all of us have passed up those who are in need...the poor and the sick. All of us have lacked compassion and mercy. And so there it is, the QUESTION MARK! Have I done enough?

But listen to what Jesus says to the sheep...listen to what Jesus says to the people on His right. "Come; you, who are blessed by My Father, take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you." You are receiving the kingdom because you visited those who are in prison, you gave food to the hungry, you gave clothes to the needy, and you took care of the sick.

So what gives here? Do sheep inherit the kingdom because of their works? In reality, we who are sheep deserve the kingdom no more than the goats do. But because sheep are blessed by the Father – heaven is theirs. God offers forgiveness! God offers salvation! And it is only saving faith that can take hold of the kingdom! And from this blessing, the blessing of the Holy Spirit, we are filled with faith which results in works. And this is what's so surprising! Because of the Holy Spirit in our lives there are works of compassion and grace that we don't even know about and even forget about...good works are that spontaneous through the power of God's Holy Spirit. Jesus will bring up things like the time you visited that person in the hospital, the hug you gave to that person who was hurting, the tears you shed for that person who lost a child, the offering you gave to God, the canned goods you dropped off for the homeless, and so many more works you do not remember, works done by you spontaneously by faith. Works that are a burden are works that are done in the flesh...works which come from selfish ambition; those works are done to gain attention. Sheep don't get tired or bored of doing good because it is Christ in them. It is the love of Christ that drives them. It is Christ that fills them. And in the end it is Christ who will call out to the sheep and tell them, "Here, you who are blessed of My Father, stand at my right – enter into my kingdom."

Sheep and goats are not made sheep and goats on judgment day. Judgment is simply revealing what already is true. For the sheep, judgment will reveal deeds of mercy and not deeds of merit. Jesus will reveal examples and give evidence that sheep are sheep and goats are goats. Therefore judgment is not a threat or something to be feared in the future, it is a warning that someday all people will be revealed for what they are in life. In fact, the last day, or the day of fulfillment is really not a judgment day at all, it is a verdict day. It's not about what we did or failed to do, it's about what we are...either sheep or goats.

I want you to leave here today knowing that as “baptized believing Christians”, Jesus is saying to you, “You are Mine! (NO QUESTION MARK!) My death on the cross was for you. (NO QUESTION MARK) My resurrection is your resurrection. (NO QUESTION MARK) My Father has given you the faith to grasp onto through His Word. And the Holy Spirit has redeemed you and has transformed you into sheep even though sometimes you have doubts, even though you may not feel like a sheep. You are blessed and you are God’s not because of what you have done but because of who you are in Christ! Here at First Good we want to give every single person opportunities to exercise their faith so as sheep we can be a blessing to all around us as together we follow the Great Shepherd.

In Christ,

Pastor Toby Joeckel