November 22, 2026

Matthew 25:31-46 "Where Did We See You?"

Next week is the first Sunday of Advent Season. And yes, this is one of those years where it falls on the last Sunday of November instead of the first Sunday in December. That means this Sunday, the last Sunday of the liturgical year, is "Reign of Christ Sunday" which was established as a reminder that our allegiance belongs to God, not earthly rulers. I was curious about when this became a "thing," so I looked it up on Google and learned that "Reign of Christ Sunday" was instituted by the Catholic Church, and it was called "The Feast of Christ the King." But over time Protestant churches adopted it. Here's the quick definition Google gave me – "Pope Pius XI instituted the feast in 1925. He created it as a countercultural response to the rise of secular nationalism, fascism, and authoritarian dictatorships in Europe." Good for him. Honestly, that's one of those cyclical adjustments that has to happen every hundred years or so to keep things from falling apart. It's nothing new. It goes all the way back to the dawn of civilization. Remember – darkness cannot overcome light. Light always wins. That's why we observe things like Christ the King Sunday. It's a good reminder that for us, Christ *is* King.

Anyway, that's where we are today as far as liturgical calendar stuff goes. Now let's have a look at this … challenging, borderline disturbing parable that Dave read for us. But as we've discovered over the past few weeks, the same could be said about any of these parables we've studied. You read it. You cringe. You draw conclusions based on preconceived notions. You think you've got it figured out, but when you do some digging you discover other ways of looking at it. Now, you might be thinking, "Oh great, here goes Jesse again with his making excuses for goats sermon that he preaches every three years when this shows up in the lectionary!" I promise. I'm not going to make excuses for the goats this year. Overtly.

All of these difficult parables in Matthew 25 were told to answer the question, "What is the kingdom of God like?" Or "what does the reign

of Christ look like" if we want to borrow the phrase from this week's observance.

Two weeks ago, we had a parable about 10 bridesmaids who fell asleep waiting for the groom to arrive. Five brought spare lamp oil, and 5 didn't. We discovered that the bridesmaids who didn't bring spare oil weren't the villains of the story. The moral of the story was, "Be ready."

Last week we had a parable about 3 slaves who were given huge amounts of money when their master went on a trip. Two invested the money, and one buried it for safe keeping. We discovered that the one who buried the money was not the villain. The moral of that story was, "Don't let your fear keep you from taking risks."

This week we have a different scenario. This one is an explanation of what will happen when the Son of Man, which both in Hebrew and Greek translates "the human one," finally sits on the throne of glory with all the nations gathered before him. This is what Pope Pius XI was hoping the nations would understand when he instituted the Feast of Christ the King back in the 1920s. When all the nations gather before the throne, the Son of Man will separate the nations like a shepherd separates sheep from goats. Okay, so what is the dividing line? What are the characteristics of a "sheep nation?"

Well, the sheep nations are the ones who, when they saw that the Son of Man or "the human one" was hungry, thirsty, naked or in prison, they took care of him. The sheep nations were confused. "Wait, when have we ever seen *you* in this condition?" The Son of Man says, "Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are *members of my family*, you did it to me." Oh! You mean, the nations who took care of their most vulnerable citizens get to … what was it he said … "inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." Yes. That's the way it works. But the ones who didn't? The goat nations? The Son of Man says, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire

prepared for the devil and his angels." So the sheep nations, or the righteous, receive eternal life. The goat nations, get eternal punishment.

Okay. Here's something that people overlook. In this parable, the sheep and the goats ask the same question. The sheep asked, "When was it that we saw you hungry and didn't give you food?" The goats asked when did we see him hungry, thirsty or in need and fail to respond?

Here's the thing – Neither group knew they were encountering the King. This is remarkable. The sheep weren't feeding people because they expected to receive some eternal reward. They were just responding to a *human* need. And the goats apparently didn't recognize that their failure to respond had any kind of spiritual significance. I can imagine the goats protesting: "Wait a minute! If we'd known it was YOU, *of course* we would have helped! Nobody told us that the king was going to show up looking like some hungry, thirsty, naked, incarcerated person!"

The lesson? Well … as messy as this parable is, the message is pretty clear – **If we only offer compassion when we know that Jesus is watching, is that really compassion?** Okay, but what about this whole "eternal punishment for the goats" issue? Yes, that sounds harsh. As we've discovered over the past couple of weeks, Jesus doesn't exactly end his stories with everybody holding hands and singing "Kumbaya." The goat nations *are* sent away into eternal punishment. And I'm not going to pretend that doesn't bother me. It does. But I also don't want us to become so preoccupied with what happens to the goats *after* the judgment that we overlook what Jesus says *before* the judgment. The important things to recognize is that Jesus treats indifference to vulnerable people as something *profoundly serious*.

The other thing that's important to consider is, "What kind of King identifies with those who need help?" And with that, "What kind of kingdom does that King expect us to build?" Also, when we try to determine what the practical application of this parable is for today, it's important to consider what the King *doesn't* ask. He doesn't ask whether

people attended worship regularly. He doesn't ask whether they could explain the Trinity. He doesn't ask whether they understood the finer points of biblical hermeneutics. He asks about food, water, clothing, hospitality, illness, and imprisonment. That doesn't mean belief and worship are unimportant. It means that in this judgment scene, **the evidence of faithfulness is found in how people treat others.** But wait, there's one more distinction to consider: The sheep don't seem to realize they've done anything extraordinary. They just cared for people. Yup. And that tells me that the kingdom of God is often revealed through ordinary acts of compassion that never make the church newsletter.

So what *does* this look like in "real life?" I often hear people say, "Well come on, sure the Bible says that, but that's not the way things works in real life." Okay. Then let's take a look at what this can look like in real life. Let's just skip on over to moments for mission --