

No Old Goats Here!

Preached by the Right Reverend Grant Lynn Ford at the Sunshine Cathedral on Sunday, November 23, 2008, at 9:00 AM.

THE WRITTEN WORD

Ephesians 1.11-14 (The Message)

¹¹⁻¹²It's in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for. Long before we first heard of Christ and got our hopes up, [God was keeping an] eye on us, had designs on us for glorious living, part of the overall purpose [God] is working out in everything and everyone.

¹³⁻¹⁴It's in Christ that you, once you heard the truth and believed it (this Message of your salvation), found yourselves home free — signed, sealed, and delivered by the holy Spirit. This signet from God is the first installment on what's coming, a reminder that we'll get everything God has planned for us, a praising and glorious life.

A reading from Mary L. S. Butterworth's essay, "The Awakening Power of Christ"

"Christ, the Divine Sonship, is our true divinity, and it is only when the Divinity is seen permeating our humanity that we are conscious of Wholeness. This is true spiritual power endowing the mind with a transcendent creativeness. This is the Rock of our salvation...

"Jesus must have looked beyond the veil of fleshy form, away from the idea of bondage, and we, too, must cast our net (spiritual thinking) on the right, or true side, if we wish a full demonstration of the Christ Consciousness...

"When Jesus said, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life,' he was referring to this divine and ineffable union of the soul with its center and source, which is the Living Spirit Almighty...

"Jesus... lifts all humanity to its Divinity."

Matthew 25.34-40 (NIV)

³⁴Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. ³⁵For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.

³⁷"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

⁴⁰"The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers [and sisters] of mine, you did for me.'"

THE PROCLAIMED WORD

These two shepherds were with their sheep in the field when they came across a big hole. One said to the other, "Better find out how deep that hole is. What if a sheep fell down there?"

So they tossed a stone, listened, but heard nothing. The other shepherd said, "Let me try a bigger rock." They listened again, and still heard nothing.

The first shepherd, feeling frustrated, looked around and found a great, big stump. He hauled it over and tipped it into the hole. A minute later the second shepherd yelled, "Watch out! There's a goat charging us." They jumped aside just in time so the goat missed them and leaped into the hole.

About that time a farmer came up and said, "Have you seen my goat?"

One of the shepherds said, "Yeah, I think he just ran into that deep hole."

The farmer replied, "Couldn't have been him. I had him tied up to a great big stump."

Our Gospel lesson this morning actually starts with a story about sheep and goats, though it didn't make it into our reading. It sounds like this:

"All the nations will be gathered before the [Son of Humanity], and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats: sheep on the right, goats on the left." *Matthew 25:32*

Who are these sheep and goats? Most scholars agree that the author of Matthew was doing his or her best to bear witness to the Jews, so the author uses code phrases such as "favored by the Almighty." This way they would know that the *chosen people* were being addressed...the people on God's right hand, at least in their thinking.

We call this 'Christ the King' Sunday, because of Jesus' use of the word 'king' in this story about sheep and the goats. This is one of the stories that got him in trouble with the people of his day. They understood him to be declaring himself to be 'King of the Jews', the ones 'on the right'.

You probably remember the accounts of Jesus' interrogation by Pilate, where we hear the question: "Are you the King of the Jews?"

Jesus' answer in every gospel something like this: "Yes, just as you say." *Matthew 27:11*

I remember a conversation I had with our guide on one of my trips to China. He said to me, “You have two political parties; we have one. But what’s the real difference?”

I had to admit that there’s not a huge difference between political parties in the U.S.

That’s when he said, “We can do pretty much anything we want to, as long as we don’t criticize the party.”

At that point I could see the difference between our system and theirs: we can criticize our political parties without being thrown in prison. That’s a substantial difference!

In Jesus’ time the people had quite a bit of freedom in their every-day lives, as long as they paid their taxes and did not criticize Rome or start any trouble for her representatives.

That didn’t stop people from trying to organize resistance against Rome. Many a martyr was crucified or otherwise tortured and killed for sedition and insurrection, or for even calling for rebellion against the occupational government. So when Jesus used the words ‘king’ and ‘kingdom’, he was playing with fire.

The whole concept of ‘kingdom’ or ‘realm’ is rife throughout the New Testament record. ‘Realm’ is often substituted for ‘kingdom’ when employing inclusive language, but it comes from the accusative form of the Latin *regimen*, meaning ‘system of rule’. So its power meaning is pretty much the same.

The fact is, people did not understand what Jesus meant when he talked about the kingdom or the realm of God. In John’s gospel, the writers inserted a bit more dialog into the interrogation scene. In response to Pilate’s question, Jesus says: “Is that your own idea, or did others talk to you about me?”

Pilate blames the question on things that the religious leaders had told him, but Jesus explains, “My kingdom is not of this world.” Pilate jumps right in: “Aha! So you *are* a king!”

Jesus replied, “You’re right in saying I’m a king. That’s why I was born; I came to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.” *John 18:33-38*

Exasperated, Pilate asks, “What is truth?” and then he turns to go and try to talk the religious leaders out of being forced to punish Jesus. Of course, we know the rest of the story. His argument against punishment failed, and Jesus was crucified.

The early church was eager to crown Jesus as king, though it’s a hard task to get Jesus to describe himself that way. About all he would admit is: “My kingdom is not of this world.”

One time Jesus was being questioned by some Pharisees about when the kingdom of God would come. Jesus replied, “The kingdom of God doesn’t come because you look hard for it, or because people say, ‘Look over here’ or ‘See, it’s over there’, because the kingdom of God is within you.” *Luke 17:21*

People today still don’t get it! There’s a whole church headquartered in Rome that thinks it is the kingdom of God on earth. For that matter, there’s another one in Salt Lake City that thinks the same thing. And the list of religious institutions around the world grows exponentially, while the truth is, the kingdom of God is right here in Fort Lauderdale!

Well, that’s where we are right now... “the kingdom of God is within YOU!”

When we try to separate the sheep from the goats, or the believers from the non-believers, or ‘us’ from ‘them’, we miss the whole point. Nobody owns the kingdom of God. The kingdom within can be ruled by the one in whom that inner kingdom is alive.

Now we begin to understand what Mary Butterworth means in her essay “The Awakening Power of Christ” when she says: “Christ, the Divine Sonship, is *our* true divinity, and it is only when the Divinity is seen permeating our humanity that we are conscious of Wholeness.”

Now Matthew’s writing has meaning for us today. When we manifest our true divinity—our inner kingdom—by feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the needy, caring for the sick, we are living out the inner kingdom. And we hear the words of Jesus: “when you do it for them, you do it for me.”

We are confident—as Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus—that the “glorious living, part of the overall purpose of God is working out” in all we say and do. No sheep, no goats, no division, no opposition, only Oneness.

We are the kingdom of God expressing through each of us—sons and daughters of God—as we are conscious of Wholeness within, without, throughout!

We are no longer goats, on the left hand of the King. Not—as some religious conservatives believe—goats tied to a stump, living in fear of ending up in the bottomless pit.

Rather, Paul tells us: “...in Christ... we, having heard and believed the truth, find ourselves home free—signed, sealed, and delivered in Spirit.”

And you know what? That’s the truth!

THE AFFIRMING WORD

I AM a spiritual being in a spiritual universe governed by spiritual principles having a human experience ...and enjoying the journey! That’s what it is! Amen!