



Rev. Dr. Craig Lindsey

Sunday, November 22, 2020

Sheep and Goats

Last week, one of our Custodians came to me saying his wife had a dream in which THE ANSWER to all the problems of our world was revealed: The Source of the Pandemic and the Source of a Cure; How America could have the greatest Voter Turnout on History by Millions of Votes, yet be more Divided than ever; How can we have Thanksgiving without Family and friends coming to dinner? He asked "What is the Answer?" and she said "The Answer to everything is Jake from State Farm!"

There is a Science Fiction Novel titled "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Universe" that describes centuries in the future there is a Super Computer called "Deep Thought" contemplating answers to the universal questions of humanity, which one day comes up with the answer to EVERYTHING IS "42." As everyone throughout the Galaxy is puzzled by this Answer, the Computer: Deep Thought responds "It is not the answers which are important but what your ultimate questions are."

Today is Christ the King Sunday, so designated by Pope Paul 6th as part of Vatican II in 1965, to identify the completion of the Church Year, in order that next week we could begin anew with the weeks of Advent leading up to Christmas. It is therefore very appropriate that we read Matthew 25's Parable of "The Last Judgement." The dilemma is what this parable addresses: Is it "What is the Secret of Life? What is the meaning of Eternal Life? What is Salvation? Who is admitted to Heaven and who is not?"

I was once invited to attend a High School World History Class. I arrived to find they had been studying the Reformation and Development of Christian Thought, and their issue was not the existence of God, the Resurrection, or Jesus' teachings. They had been told that John Calvin was identified with PreDestination and they disagreed, so let's call the Presbyterian Pastor to interpret this. I tried to explain that in "Calvin's 1500 pages of The Institutes of the Christian Religion, Calvin spent only 1½ pages on Heaven and 1 paragraph on Hell. The issue that all philosophers and religion were wrestling with in Calvin's time was whether we believe the world is inherently Good or Evil. Calvin's real contribution to this argument was the idea of Perpetual Grace, that while we by Free Will choose our own desires, God continually appeals to us throughout life with acts of grace to turn our lives around." Finally the Class Valedictorian stated: "That is all well and good, but we have been told all our lives, by parents, teachers, coaches and counselors that we are good, who are you to tell us we are not and that according to your judgement we might go to Hell?" The underlying question here was not whether the world is Good or Evil, whether we are going to Heaven or not, but we tell our children and grandchildren they are Perfect, and in the 21st Century none of us want to be Judged, by anyone, even God.

Second, my Father and I were extremely close, so when he went into Hospice care, I came and sat by his bedside morning, noon and night throughout the last several days, often talking all through the night.

We reflected on his life, God, the church and the world. When he passed it felt like everything was resolved and he was at peace. Several days later, we received a letter from a man claiming to be our brother by another mother, who had been given up for adoption. The difficulty being that his reality was in opposition to the reality I knew, of the man whom we both claimed to be our father. So was he a SHEEP or was he a GOAT?

What an odd colloquialism that is... According to Jesus' Parable, Christ is identified as being a LAMB, which according to the Passover of Judaism is The Sacrificial Lamb, whose blood during the Exodus was used to mark the doorposts of those already claimed and loved by God. CHRIST THE LAMB sits upon the THRONE of GOD, Not that Jesus has usurped the place of God, but that the ONE TRUE GOD known to us as the Creator, now is also known to the world as the Sacrifice/Savior and LORD. Having paid with his own life, suffering and death for our Sins, according to this Parable he sits on the Judgement Seat. Old Testament and New, the people of God knew about Sheep and Goats. Sheep have thick wool accustomed to sleeping outdoors in the cool night air of the wilderness. Goats have short hair, and prefer the warmth and security of being clustered together in the comfort of being indoors. But in the Passover, in addition to Sheep becoming the Sacrifice; there is a role for A Goat. Each person was to write down their sins on parchment or cloth, making a list of what we wish we had never done. These lists were then pierced on the horns of the Goat, and the Goat was chased out of their lives and community, baring the sins of the Sinners as a Scapegoat.

Joe Garagiola had been the Catcher for the St. Lois Cardinals baseball team before age caught up with him and he became an Anchor on NBC's Today Show. One day he described his frustration, that he had gone into the Drug Store to get Extra Strength Excedrin, Kaopectate, BenGay, a Heating Pad, and pillows for the Corn on his toes. But his frustration was the false empathy of the Store Clerk, who handing him his Receipt said "I hope you enjoy your day!"

The beauty of this parable is that what is required to be a sheep of Jesus' Flock is not to rescue those in Prison, but simply to visit. Simple but humbling, testing our commitment to one another. Decades ago an acquaintance called me late one evening, saying that he had gotten into trouble, I listened and at the end of his Call, I convinced him that the following morning I would pick him up at his apartment and accompany him as he turned himself in to the Police. Over the next several months, I stood in the Courtroom as he went for arraignment, and plead his guilt, then sentencing, then visited him in Prison. While usually that meant waiting until he was called, and talking to him through plate glass, at one point he got into even more trouble and was in lock-up as potentially suicidal. I contacted the guards and as his Pastor was allowed to go to the Cellblock. First, that meant taking everything out of your pockets, taking off your belt and necktie and shoes, then being submitted to a full body search including opening your mouth for the guard to search. Then I was led to a steel door, which mechanically opened, then closed and locked with the sound of a steel lock behind you, before the next door opened, where you were led down a hallway to another set of double security locks, before going down an elevator, and another security screening, before being admitted to the cellblock, where I was told which cell was his. It was a very depressing place as many were screaming, a radio and television were playing, there were no windows only florescent light. I found his cell and was able to talk to him through a slot in the door, as I listened and prayed with him. Fifteen minutes later, I was told time was up, and I was shown back to the security doors and elevator. Days later, I received a letter from this man, stating how much it had meant that anyone would go through all of that to see him; that in a time when he felt the most alone and

overwhelmed by his state in life that anyone would care to seek him out. He faced his full sentence in prison, but he was not alone and did not feel forgotten.

I have a confession to make. As much as I have enjoyed participating in Medical Mission trips, served as a Hospital Chaplain and on Hospital Ethics Committees, I cannot stand the sight of blood. I mean I get really woosy. But one evening, I was called to visit a woman who had to have a Central Line and portal surgically implanted, and because of her problems with anesthesia, the surgeon needed to do this in her hospital room. So I came and sat with her, holding her hand, talking about her family, hopes, dreams and fears, all the while keeping my vision and her thoughts off of what was happening surgically.

Personally, I do not believe the point of this parable is who sits on the Judgement Seat (we know it is Jesus), as much difficulty as people have with judgement, I do not believe it is that we are judged, but that when we refuse to offer or to receive Grace, when we cut ourselves off from others unwilling and unable to care about others, we have already judged ourselves and condemned ourselves to being alone for eternity.