



The Dream of God

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn for St. John's Episcopal Church on 11-22-20

Christ the King / Realm of Christ Sunday; Matthew 25:31-46

In the name of the Triune God, who calls each living creature Beloved. **Amen.**

Last week out of the blue I got a phone call from a friend in high school whom I hadn't spoken with since graduation from high school more than thirty years ago. I went to high school in Brussels, and this friend, Stefan, is an Austrian who now lives in Jamaica. After three decades I couldn't for the life of me figure out why he would be calling. As it turns out he was asking me for my opinion of what in the world was happening in the United States. From his perspective, he couldn't fathom how so many in our nation were supporting President Trump. He said, and I quote, "in Austria we have seen this happen, and we know how it ends." He then proceeded to describe how he had been calling all of the Americans in our class, getting their perspectives on what was going on, and vigorously trying to persuade people about what he sees happening here. He himself is atheist, but he knows that I am a priest, and said he really hoped religious leaders in our time would have a strong voice for ethics, democracy, and also of reconciliation.

In times when the stakes are so high, it is almost impossible not

to be dualistic about things. I cannot say that all opinions are morally equivalent. But I also know that more people turned out for the last election than ever before, and it is clear that many good people disagree about what is happening and what we need. Where do we draw the line? What, precisely, is the place beyond which we may not cross, as a nation? Is it the political aisle? Is it single issues like immigration, gun control, abortion, health care? Is it the overall paradigm – a unifying federalism or decentralized states' rights?

In today's gospel reading, we have the familiar story of the sheep and the goats. Jesus says that in the very end of time, when God is judging the world, there is a line that will separate sheep and goats. It will be the difference between those who care for the hungry, sick, the stranger, imprisoned, and naked, and those who do not. Matthew's gospel was written for a severely struggling Christian community, probably after Rome's destruction of Jerusalem. These Christians had double layers of suffering: they were Jews who had been forced out of Israel, and they were also now being kicked out of synagogues in the diaspora because of their identification as Christians. They belonged nowhere. *They themselves were* the hungry, the stranger, the sick, the imprisoned.

For people who are suffering – who are hungry and at constant risk of violence and oppression even though everyone knows they are suffering and do not help them—there can be an intense need to know that sometime, someday, there will be judgment. If earthly kingdoms do not provide justice, could we

imagine that God would do so? Could there at least be a reckoning in cosmological time, even if there will not be one worth anything in political time?

The stories of scripture contain our spiritual memory, and this memory contains both stories of liberation and of judgment. The Israelites were liberated from slavery in Egypt, but not before God inflicted the ten plagues on the Egyptians—which the Egyptians could have completely avoided if they had just let the people go. Jesus speaks here of God recognizing what really matters—treating all as family, caring for their needs—in a way that must surely have provided some comfort to those who needed it the most. But do we think that God would really assign whole categories of people to eternal fire? Have you ever fed the hungry? Have you ever missed an opportunity to feed the hungry? Which are you, a sheep or a goat?

Today is Christ the King Sunday. We might also call it the Reign of Christ Sunday. This is the very last Sunday in the liturgical year before next week, when the church's new year, Advent, begins again. This is the time for us to remember what is truly important. This is the time for us to remember what matters in the kingdom of God, which encompasses both cosmological time and also right here, right now, 2020. This is the time for us to affirm that what will save our nation is not which party has control over the government, though of course that matters on all sorts of issues. This is the time for us to remember the politics of love. Not a sentimental weak "let's all get along" kind of love, but a love that will keep us in relationship with people

who disagree in a way that seeks some way to be both honest and kind simultaneously. No one ever changed when someone not in relationship with them pointed out their faults in anger. People change when they are loved into it.

The same Jesus who told this story about the sheep and the goats also said that we are to love our enemies, to bless those who persecute us, for God makes the sun to shine on the good and the wicked, and who are we to do any less? The sun shines because that is what it does, regardless of what is around it. What would it take for us to become people that care for one another so much so that we do not see “us” and “them” any more, but only members of our extended family? This is what the Beloved Community is. This is what happens in the kingdom of God, in the reign of Christ, in which people from every tribe and language and people and nation gather around the throne of God, and God wipes every tear from their eyes.

On Tuesday I am going to lead a book conversation for the Episcopal Church in Minnesota’s weekly “Leading Beyond the Blizzard” conversation with our Bishop Craig Loya, about the book called *Reconciling All Things: A Christian Vision for Justice, Peace and Healing*. This book’s central thesis is that we can reclaim the word reconciliation as the heart of Christian faith. Now of course, in our time, the word “reconciliation” can be really problematic. For example, to speak about “Racial reconciliation” rubs many people the wrong way. It implies that there was a good relationship to begin with that we can get back to, whereas in the United States those who are now

African Americans were kidnapped and enslaved as the beginning of the relationship. Reconciliation can make it sound like we're now just asking for forgiveness and to move on, and that can't happen before justice and reparations and amends are made. In human terms real reconciliation might never be able to be fully realized.

But this is why we need to remember the reign of Christ, Christ the King Sunday. What may be impossible in human terms is nevertheless the dream of God. It will not do to give up the word or hope of reconciliation, the Beloved Community, for all people—black and white, Democrat and Republican, those who voted for Joe Biden and those who voted for Donald Trump. This does not mean that all opinions are morally equivalent. It does not mean either that “we” are morally superior or inferior to “them”, whomever we are speaking about. The Kingdom of God, real reconciliation, the Beloved Community, is the vision of a truly beautiful world that we need because it is valuable enough to keep us on the journey. The journey of following Jesus' Way of Love is one that requires endurance, and sacrifice, and transformation, and only a vision that we believe is deeply valuable and also possible will keep us on it. That vision is beyond us, but it is contained in our spiritual memories, in the stories of scripture that speak of a lion lying down with a lamb.

Although Jesus is speaking in the starkest terms of sheep and goats and eternal life and eternal fire, we are all in essence

good goats,¹ as my spiritual direction teacher Matt Linn describes it. Jesus is advocating a life in which we are so transformed by the love of God that we are softened, our shoulders come down, and we are truly free to love all others. This love is eternally life-giving and liberating. When we are free to love in a way that shines toward all others, we experience the eternal kingdom of God within us. When we are not able to love, when we are constricted by hatred and apathy—even if these are totally justified—we experience an eternal regret, an existential cold and separation from our truest nature and from the God who made us.

Wherever you are this moment reading this or watching it, I'd invite you to close your eyes for a minute. Consider simply welcoming the presence of God to the fullness of who you are, including your loves and your hates, your generosity and resentment, the part of you that cares and the part that is too overwhelmed or hurt or angry to care. Allow the dream of God for truly Beloved Community to meet you as you are. Imagine that in the Kingdom of God, your life matters, as does all others. Imagine that you can spend the rest of your life following Jesus' Way of Love, imperfectly, but knowing that the journey itself is reconciliation, that in the love of Christ nothing is impossible. Let the vision of God, the dream of God for Beloved Community, give you hope, even in these times, even in 2020 and the world that follows. **Amen.**

¹ See Dennis, Sheila Fabricant and Matt Linn, *Good Goats: Healing Our Image of God* (Paulist Press, 1994).