

17 November 2002  
Second Last Sunday in the Church Year

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Alexandria, VA

## Jesu Juva

“Sheep First, then Deeds”

Text: Matthew 24:31-46

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

I read the sermon of a brother pastor this week, preached not too long ago, and in this sermon he wrote the following:

*“I am forever astounded at how bold we are in promising big things . . . but how we hedge on the little things. In our confirmation vows we never flinch as we promise to suffer all, even death, rather than cease to continue steadfast in the confession of this Church. We are ready to suffer death. It is inconvenience that we are worried about. We imagine ourselves ready to be burned at the stake, but that doesn't mean we are ready to give sacrificially of our income. After all, we need cable TV and DVDs. In the same way we are ready to confess without compromise before kings and rulers, just not in front of our friends. We are a pathetic people, curved in on ourselves, weak with greed, lust, and ambition. Our priorities are right on paper, just not in our hearts. Repent. Stop the lies. Hear the Word of God.”* (Rev. David H. Petersen, Redeemer Lutheran Church, Ft. Wayne, 24<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity 2002)

Those are pretty strong words, but, as much as we hate to admit it, true, aren't they? But why? Perhaps we so readily promise the big things because we don't think they're really going to happen! So we're not really putting ourselves on the line, are we? But the little things, the inconveniences, the sacrifices, those things happen every day. If we promise them, we'll actually have to do them! . . . So what does all of this say about our hearts?

Now listen again to the words of Jesus that we heard in the Holy Gospel. ***“For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.”*** . . . Did you notice? All little things! All the little inconveniences that we are so often hesitant to interrupt our busy, busy lives and do! . . . And then what did Jesus say to the others? ***“For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.”*** And maybe those goats were thinking, *“But those are only little things! We promised the*

*really big things! And if we had seen you there . . .” . . . So what does all of this say about our hearts? Your heart?*

When I hear these words I think of my situation in New York. We had many people coming by the church and coming by our home, looking for food, clothes, and other things. Some were honest, some were not. Some were hungry, some just wanted to buy drugs. And some we gave to, and some we did not. But how I hated being interrupted! The knock that came during dinner, when I was trying to spend time with my family. Or while I was in the midst of my *important* work, like writing a sermon. I did not want to be interrupted. I did not want to be inconvenienced. Couldn't these people come at a different time? And while we often helped, my heart certainly was not in it. . . . Perhaps you recognize some of these same thoughts in your own heart.

So when you heard the words of the Holy Gospel this evening, what did you think? What will be said of you? We know we haven't done what we ought, and even when we have, it is often times grudgingly, and our hearts are not in it. And so even our good is tainted by sin. We have made promises we know we cannot keep. We know we do not measure up. If you think you have any merit or worthiness before God at all, this Gospel certainly puts you in your place. We cannot do what God requires. We cannot even do the little things.

But all is not lost, for there is something very important to notice in this reading. A little Gospel detail which is often overlooked, but which can give us the hope and confidence to face the future and the judgment that will take place on the last day. And it is simply this: the sheep and the goats are separated before any judgment takes place. Jesus does not first look at what we have done and then separate the sheep from the goats. As if He said, “*OK, you've done good so you go over there; but you – no, not so good, so you go over there.*” Even though that's how most people picture it. No, before any judgment takes place, a division is made. Before any judgment is made, Jesus already knows those who belong to Him (the sheep) and those who do not (the goats). And that is a determination made on the basis of faith. Faith in our Saviour Jesus Christ, whose blood cleanses us from all our sin. Who came and lived the perfect life that we cannot. Who died to pay the price for our transgressions. Who gives us His righteousness and perfection, and who joins us to Himself so closely and intimately that we live in Him and He is us. And this One, who lived and died and lives again for us, knows His own, His sheep. And He knows you. He knows your sin for He bore it on the cross. He knows your struggle for He is with you in it. He knows your heart for He sent His Spirit to live in it and make it His own. And this One has made you – unworthy as you are – he has made you one of His sheep, washing you clean and bringing you into His sheep pen, the Church, in Holy Baptism, feeding you with His Supper, and speaking to you in His Word

so that you know His voice. You are one of His own, and He knows it. You are saved by the grace of God through faith in your Saviour, and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast. . . . And so when that last day comes, and all are raised to face the judgment, it is not a dreadful voice that you will hear, but a friendly voice, the voice that you know well, the voice of your Good Shepherd, saying to you, ***“Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”***

And that is the second important point to recognize in this reading. Jesus says, ***“Come . . . inherit the kingdom prepared for you.”*** Inherit is a gift word. You don’t *earn* an inheritance, you are *given* an inheritance after someone dies and leaves you something out of their own generosity. And so it is not our deeds that have earned us the Kingdom and the salvation we will receive at the end – it is Jesus who died and left us His inheritance. An inheritance of grace, sealed in His blood.

But we cannot ignore the fact that Jesus does, in this reading, mention certain of our works. What was done and what was left undone. There will still be a judgment. Even though Jesus already knows who belongs to Him, there is still a *visible* judgment that takes place. A judgment based not on faith, which cannot be seen, but on the *evidence* of faith, which can be seen. . . . Why? So that all can see, once and for all, that God did not deal with anyone unfairly, or unjustly. And so after the sheep and the goats have been separated, Jesus points to the works done by the sheep and those not done by the goats. The evidences of faith, which is not able to remain idle. Or as Luther said, *“Faith alone saves, but faith is never alone.”*

And again, notice, all little things. The good works that we did in taking care of our neighbor. Giving someone a drink. Helping someone in need. Listening. Giving someone a shoulder to cry on. Being there to support someone in a time of difficulty. Lending freely. Giving our time. Helping those in prison. . . . Those are things that we consider so little and insignificant and unimportant, and yet they are what Jesus *remembers*. These are the things that are precious and important to him. The things of our vocations. The fruits of our faith; the evidence of our faith.

I think that sometimes we think that since we are saved only by grace through faith in Jesus that it doesn’t really matter what we do – all that matters is that we believe. But here we see otherwise. That it does matter. That Jesus knows those things, and remembers them! Again, they don’t save us – we’ve already been saved by our Saviour! But what we do in this life still matters. Jesus wants to take care of others by using us to take care of others. And when we do, He is pleased, and He remembers!

But also notice here what Jesus doesn't mention. He doesn't mention what we tend to remember – and that is sins of His sheep. Our shortcomings, our mistakes, our willful sins, all that we know we've done wrong! He doesn't mention any of that, because its not there! Its not in the record books, and its not on us, because Jesus took all of our sins to the cross. He took them off of us and put them on Himself and paid the price for them when He died. And so since He took them away from us, and already paid for them, there's nothing left to bring up! Those sins have already been separated from us ***“as far as the east is from the west,”*** and so the only evidence to mention . . . is the good! And that's exactly what we see happening in these verses from Matthew!

But there is also an ugly side to this picture. For those whose sins have not been washed away by Jesus blood; whose good works are even tainted by sin; who do not know their Saviour by faith, that day will be a dreadful day. For how dreadful to hear those words, ***“Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”*** . . . The saddest thing of all is that Jesus paid for their sins, too. ***“Father, forgive them.”*** He died on the cross for all the sins of all people who ever lived. But without faith they do not receive the benefits of Jesus' sacrifice for them. They do not have forgiveness, they are not members of His family, and that last day will be a dreadful day, when, faithless, they will be exposed as who they really are.

But for you and I, the good news that we understand from this reading is that we don't have to worry about the last day – when it will come, what it will be like, what will happen. The really big thing has already been taken care of, by Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who laid down His life for the sheep. And you are one of His sheep, a child of His flock. He knows you, and He's going to see you through that day. . . . And so He doesn't want you to worry about that day – He wants you to live. Live for Him. Because you are free! If you had to live your life worrying constantly about your salvation, you'd be too afraid to do anything for fear that you were messing up! But we're free from all that! Our inheritance, our salvation is secure. And so we are free to live. To go out and do those little things. Take care of your neighbor, and help those in need. And come to your Father's house. Confess your sins, hear His Word, receive His body and blood, be with your family here, as often as you can! Not because you have to, but because you can! And when that last day does come – whenever it comes – you'll feel right at home. Because you'll be with the sheep you've spent so much time with, you'll be with your Saviour who loves you and made you His child, and you'll be in your Father's house. And you will hear those wonderful words of your brother and Saviour, ***“Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”***

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds steadfast in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.