

**[Jesus said to the disciples:] <sup>31</sup>“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. <sup>32</sup>All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, <sup>33</sup>and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. <sup>34</sup>Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; <sup>35</sup>for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, <sup>36</sup>I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ <sup>37</sup>Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? <sup>38</sup>And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? <sup>39</sup>And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ <sup>40</sup>And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family you did it to me.’ <sup>41</sup>Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; <sup>42</sup>for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, <sup>43</sup>I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ <sup>44</sup>Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ <sup>45</sup>Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ <sup>46</sup>And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”**

In Nomine Jesu

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The setting for this text is one that really sticks in your mind. I’d be amazed if you don’t remember it big and bold from when you last heard it or read it as a little child – or whenever you got a first impression of it. It’s quite a picture ... though it might be a different one for you than it is for me.

For me it’s like there’s this enormous crowd walking slowly but surely up this long, gently sloping hill. Moving along at a pretty good clip, I might add, since it’s a crowd made up of each and every person and every kind of people from all times in history. Just imagine! A caveman with a club here, a dazzling renaissance princess there, a pro hockey player here, and firefighter there, a student here, a teacher there. A blacksmith here, an astronaut there. Black and white, yellow and brown, and all the shades ... moving along steadily up that hill.

And way at the top ... it's a way's away but you can still see it pretty clearly, is this huge, brightly lit throne with Jesus sitting in it. Angels around and all sorts of glitter and gold shining and sparkling everywhere. And it ... well ... it's not going the way we thought it would.

You know the plan we figured on, right? The one where, trembling a bit, we're standing finally in front of Jesus the Righteous Judge and he's asking us, "Why should I let you into my heaven?" And we're clearing our throat a little bit as we prepare to give him pitifully small list of reasons why that should happen from our not-overflowing record of good deeds in this life.

But we look ahead and we see that that line just keeps moving. It gets to Jesus and nobody stops or gets a chance even to speak let alone listen to a question. It's like everybody is just walking along and as they get there some are directed to go in one direction and others in the other. Amazing scene, isn't it, but not what we expected.

It's just like a shepherd at the end of the day in the time of Jesus. He brings the flock in from pasture. The shepherd knows that some, the sheep, need to be taken care of because they can't fend well for themselves. The others, the goats, can do just fine on their own during the night. So the sheep get gathered up and taken to shelter and fed and given a place to rest, but the goats are out there on their own. Feeling pretty good about things, I might add. Nobody tells them where to go, what to eat, when to go to bed. Not a bad life, eh? Footloose and fancy free, with nobody telling you what to do ... where to go ... what to eat ... when to sleep. Lotsa' kids think that's a pretty good definition of heaven.

Until it happens. Then that night out there, all alone, starts feeling more scary than we thought. The shepherd's light is gone, shadows and darkness of varying shades is all you see. You can hear some noises ... scary, like something's out there that might want to do you in. You're pretty tough ... but tough enough? Another goat bleats as it's tearing off into the distance scared to death about something. What's to eat? Man, this is getting to hang out. I'd like to rest but ... with those noises out there, how can you afford to shut your eyes and get some rest? All this freedom ... chance to be on our own ... it all of a sudden is nowhere near as great as we thought it would be. What happened? Why did we end up out here, all on our own? Lonely. Scared. Hungry. Weary. Hopeless. Helpless. Nobody but me to take care of me?

And this is when those goats realize that the "surprise" is on them. All this, "I can take care of myself just fine, thank you!" stuff doesn't seem so great anymore. And they see the glow of the shepherd's campfire and wonder how come the sheep who seemed so "out of it" a while back are the ones getting all

the good stuff like care and food and protection and peace. **“How did that happen, anyway?”** the goats ask.

Well, truth be told, the sheep are just as surprised. They were just going along doing their thing, being sheep, doing what sheep do. And all of a sudden they look around them and see that they have got it really good. **“How did that happen, anyway?”** the sheep ask. **“We’ve got it so good, and we can’t figure out why!”**

That’s a little different twist on the story than the one we usually think of, right? We imagine ourselves approaching the throne, sweating it out for a minute as we respond to THE QUESTION and then having it really good or really bad after that. But this story ... just look at it again, folks ... doesn’t even give anyone a chance to speak for themselves before the decision’s made. Not fair, right? WHAT A SURPRISE!

After a while, the sheep and the goats get a chance to talk with the Great Shepherd about what happened. And that’s where the story in our text gets really interesting. And, again, it just doesn’t seem fair. It seems so ... arbitrary!

The sheep see Jesus and he says to them, **“Enjoy everything around you! I’m glad to give you the best of everything I ever promised you and that you could ever imagine. Have a ball! ... Forever! You get to because you took such good care of me.”**

It might not be the best time to open your mouth right then ... if you’re a sheep. I mean, what you’ve got is good ... don’t press the issue, eh? But no, you’ve got to open your mouth. **“Jesus ... sorry to interrupt ... but there’s got to be something wrong. I mean I never did anything to you ... good or bad ... back there. I don’t ever even remember coming across you, Jesus. Are you sure this is where I’m supposed to be?”**

Of course, the goats couldn’t agree with that question more. The more they look at what they’ve got and what the sheep are enjoying, they figure they’re in the wrong place, too ... at least it sure isn’t where they want to be. **“Jesus,”** one is bold enough to ask, **“how come we’re here and they’re there? I mean, look at the record. We’ve got some winners and some losers here and they’ve got some winners and some losers over there. Fact is, Jesus, if you want to know the truth ... I just took an informal, unscientific pole – but I think it’s pretty accurate ... the track record of folk over here looks at least as good, maybe better than those over there. I mean, we took care of business, Jesus. Put in a full day’s work every day. Earned a good day’s pay. Took good care of what we got. Even shared with others ... had the best United Way record by far compared to what they produced, if you’d care to check that out.”**

**"It might be a great record,"** Jesus says, **"but it's not the one that counts. You were so busy getting it right for yourself in life that you forgot about the one who really counts ... me! When you had the chance to care for me, you didn't."**

**"Whoa, Jesus ... all due respect here, of course!"** we say. **"I've never ever seen you before today ... not once, ever. So how can you say I didn't care for you? Are you sure this is where I'm supposed to be?"**

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What an irony. Sheep and goats. Both surprised. Both in places they think they didn't deserve. Both there for keeps ... forever ... not just for a parlor game time of it. Both where they are ... because of Jesus in their lives. But what a difference!

You see, the goats spent their whole life keeping score. Making sure that in the grand balance sheet of life they came out on the "plus" side, not the negative. They worked so hard at it that they figured it was a done deal. **"If there's anything after all of this, I'm so sure I've done it right here and now and in the past that if there is a good deal after this I'll be sharing it."**

**"Wrong!"** says Jesus. **"You missed the whole point. This isn't about keeping score, about doing something so you'll get noticed for doing it right. This isn't about living right ... or at least better than a whole lot of others. That's not it. It's about how you see me."**

**"The sheep?"** Jesus continues, **"Well, they knew they had no hope without being with me. They knew they could trust me with their lives and futures, because I'd lay my life down for them. I did it once when I died on Calvary and everybody who was keeping score thought that I was 'down for the count.' But God in heaven raised me from the dead and said that because of my death and resurrection all who put their trust and confidence in me alone would have eternal life. And that's just what the sheep got. Everything God ever promised them. And more! What a joy!"**

I had a seminary professor who was paid to teach us how to prepare a sermon and preach it – no comments on how effective he was, please! He said that after you read the text ask yourself this question: "Why do folks in this specific congregation – and no other, need to hear a sermon on this text – and no other, preached by you – and no one else, on this particular day – and no other?" I've wrestled with that set of questions virtually every time I've prepared to preach a text. "What does it mean for us today?" - it asks us in the most pressing way possible.

Here's what I think. I think that most of us spend our lives figuring like the goats figured. We try to do it right, as much as we can. Give everybody a fair shake and a fair break. Do to them the way we'd want done to us. Not perfect,

of course, but ... heh, heh ... **"better than most, if you don't mind my saying so."** But who's counting, right? Wink!

Jesus calls us away from that way of thinking and hoping and trusting. He says that we don't ever have to worry about whether anybody's counting. He says that as we love and trust and hope in Jesus for everything and for sure, we're going to be so drawn to him that we're like him ... no, more than that ... we're really doing what he's got on his mind for this world. We're "little Christ's" in this world serving those whom Jesus came to seek and to save and to care for. When we look for him we see them ... their need, hear them ... their call ... so clearly that responding to it is all we can think about. And ...

You see, this is really another Stewardship Sermon – about the "more than dollars stuff" of stewardship. It's calling us to see that all that we do with all that we have and are is about our life in God. The rest of our lives is "the rest of the story" that Jesus is talking about in this text. Our faithful stewardship is not just our contributions in the offering plate.

So his call is this: Stop keeping score thinking that you can earn your way into God's eternal promise. It'll never work. Spend your time looking for those who need a hand and find a way to be part of the solution for them. Jesus has already been the whole solution for you and for me, so what better way to spend our lives? Eh?

And a footnote here, if you please. I recently saw a copy of the Ministry Site Profile prepared by the Call Committee for Council approval. It's on its way to assist our bishop in our shared search for a new pastor. I couldn't help but be a bit proud of you. That document lifted up at several times and in several ways the passion that exists here for those in need ... the "Christ's" we see in them. We've made a great start. More to go, though. And it's less about doing what we've been doing well than it is about seeing with a new set of eyes every day, all the time.

In the Name of Jesus!

AMEN

Soli Deo Gloria