

Trinity XXVI (observed)

St. Matthew 25.31-46

November 15, 2020

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

On the Day of Judgment, when Jesus:

comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them ... as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left.

Why are the goats condemned? Because, Jesus says,

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 take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.

These words of Jesus appear to confirm what we instinctively think: a person gets into heaven by being good.

Indeed, being a Christian does involve a life of charity. Jesus says, "**Be merciful, as your Father is merciful.**" The words of Jesus are clear: "**Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.**" The Fifth Commandment says, "**You shall not murder,**" and the *Small Catechism* explains, "*We should fear and love God so that we do not hurt or harm our neighbor in his body, but help and support him in every physical need.*"

So, if we just feed the poor, clothe the naked, and visit the sick and imprisoned, we'll be among the righteous, right? We gravitate naturally to the Law, and suppose that Jesus is giving us the ethical qualifications for righteousness. If anyone goes to hell, it's those who just weren't good enough. It's appealing. Do this, don't do that, and any bad stuff we do we can justify because the other person is a jerk. Do your part, "give

something back,” “pay it forward,” that’s what being a Christian is all about.

Or is it?

If the Christian religion is just about being nice, there’s no real reason to be a Christian. There are plenty of non-Christians who help people out and give to charity.

But a theology of “salvation by being nice” contradicts the overarching message of God’s Word that you can never do enough nice things, and that the nice things you actually do are, in God’s eyes, as filthy rags. Being a good person isn’t enough in the sight of God. You have to be better, far better than a good person. You must be perfect as God is perfect. That’s what the Law demands. Your righteousness must exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees. Whoever keeps the whole law, and yet stumbles in one point, is guilty of all. A man is not justified, declared righteous, by any works of the law, the Scripture says.

So if being that good is the standard – being perfect – then I have to conclude for myself that I cannot qualify. And I have bad news for you: you don’t qualify either. Not even close. You haven’t done all that the Law requires outwardly, and those times that you did, you grumbled and complained about it inwardly. You have been envious of your neighbor’s goods and situation in life, you have told lies to make yourself look better, you have been greedy, you haven’t been sexually pure, you haven’t trusted God in your vocation as a spouse or a single person, you have dishonored those in authority over you, you haven’t paid full attention and taken to heart the Word of God, you haven’t prayed as you should, and you have feared, loved, and trusted in created things ahead of your Creator.

No, if salvation came by feeding the poor or clothing the naked, you would have to throw away the Lord’s Prayer, where we pray, “**Forgive us our**

trespasses," not, "Remember our good works." There would be no reason to baptize your children.

So, what does this Gospel mean? Listen again to the words of Jesus: **"Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me."** Who are Jesus' "brethren"? Sometimes, "brother" just means a male sibling. Sometimes it means all Christians. But in Matthew's Gospel, we see another frequent use of the word "brethren." When Jesus rose from the dead, He told the women at the tomb, **"Go and tell My brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see Me."** *These "brethren" are the Apostles.* Then, just before His Ascension, Jesus says to His brethren the Apostles, **"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you."** Jesus' brethren, then, are those charged to preach the Gospel to all nations. In Matthew's Gospel, those who baptize and teach the nations are Jesus' brothers.

Jesus had said earlier, **"This gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come."** In today's reading, all nations are brought before Jesus in judgment. How will they be judged? They will be judged according to how they received *Jesus' brethren*. Did they receive the preaching about Jesus? Did they receive the pastors who invited them to repent and be baptized? Or did they ignore them and despise God's Word?

This isn't about special treatment for the pastor. It's about special attention to the Words of Jesus.

Jesus says to the preachers He sends, **"He who hears you, hears Me, and he who rejects you, rejects Me."** Elsewhere Jesus says,

Whoever receives you receives Me, and whoever receives Me receives Him who sent Me. The one who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and the one who receives a righteous man because

he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man's reward. And whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward.

In other words, those who give to the Apostles, these "little ones," the "least of these My brethren" – whoever gives to them even a cup of cold water will receive a reward. The cup of cold water is not a good work to gain entrance into heaven; it is a sign that the hearer believes the good news of Jesus preached by His little brothers, and so does what the Word says: shares all good things with his teacher.

The minister's job is to get out of the way and let Jesus speak and work. A pastor who tries to make himself the authority is making a mockery of God and blaspheming Him. It is God's service, not the pastor's.

Pastor Rogness and I are nothing; we are the "little ones." But Jesus says that when you receive the Gospel from us, you are receiving Him. It's Jesus who baptizes you, Jesus who forgives you, Jesus who communes you, Jesus who saves you – and it will be Jesus who raises your dead body from the earth and speaks Good News to you at the judgment. The men who are the pastors are nothing – but in that office, Christ has placed His promise.

So to sum up, we don't have a lesson about doing works of mercy in today's gospel, although we should do good to our neighbors, feed the poor, clothe the naked. A Christian is merciful and should love his neighbor as himself. But today we hear about what will be required on the last day, the day of judgment. And what is required is trust in the works of Jesus. It's all about Jesus, who gives you His forgiveness through His little brothers the pastors. So receive it with repentant joy, and wait for those happy words which will be spoken to you at the last day: **"Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."** +INJ+

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.