

"Why We Have to Talk About the Judgment"

Sermon for Christ the King Sunday

Lectionary Year A

November 20, 2011

Texts: Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Ephesians 1:15-23;

Matthew 25:31-46

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This is Christ the King Sunday in the Church. The New Testament teaches us that there are three "offices" of Christ—prophet, priest, and king. As a prophet, Jesus both pointed to and ushered in the kingdom of God and made evident its blessings and demands. As our high priest, Christ provided the sacrifice necessary for the redemption of our sins by offering his own life as a substitute for ours. In addition, Jesus intercedes on our behalf continually before God.

Not only is Christ both prophet and priest, but he is also king. He reigns in heaven, seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, as the Apostles' Creed states. Our passages of scripture for today show us various aspects of Jesus' kingly reign. Both Psalm 100 and the passage from Ezekiel describe the Lord as a shepherd-king who will gather and provide for his people.

Although the writers of the Old Testament would have been ascribing this role to Yahweh, the covenant God of Israel, through the progressive revelation of the New Testament we realize that God's rule and reign is accomplished in Christ, to whom the lordship of the universe has been given by God. The passage from Ephesians points to the fact that as king, Christ is "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but

also in the age to come."

There is another aspect of Christ's kingship that we must talk about, even though we may not want to. As king and lord of all, *Christ will judge the nations*. There will be judgment for all people at Christ's coming, for believers and for those who do not yet believe.

If there is anyone who does not like to talk about judgment, it is I. I'm a grace guy. I much prefer to talk about grace. Let the guys down the street talk about judgment. I'm more comfortable with grace. Most of us who are United Methodists feel the same way. Just look in our Hymnal. Flip over to the Index of Topics and Categories that begins on page 934. If you compare the number of entries under the category Grace with those under the category Judgment, you will see that Grace has twice as many entries as Judgment. So I certainly am not alone in being about twice as ready to talk about God's grace as I am about God's judgment. Nevertheless I feel that we have to talk about the judgment of God for some good reasons that I would like to share with you now.

First, **we have to talk about judgment to do justice to the biblical witness**. As one scholar points out, "that judgment before God is inescapable to each [person] is the unmistakable teaching of the New Testament" [Stagg, *New Testament Theology*, pp. 331-2]. And as a former college professor of mine writes in one of his books, "God's final judgment of [persons] is assumed in the New Testament. Scripture passages in abundance support this assumption. Most of these passages are presented not to prove the fact of judgment but to warn [us] of its coming [Summers, *The Life Beyond*, p. 147].

What these scholars are telling us is that we can't ignore the idea

of judgment if we are going to be true to our claim of biblical authority. The Bible points to the reality of judgment, and if we are going to take the Bible seriously, we are going to have to deal with the concept of judgment in some way.

Second, not only do we have to talk about the judgment to do justice to the biblical witness, but **we have to talk about judgment to do justice to the nature of God**, to which the biblical witness points, of course. God is all loving, all forgiving, and all merciful. As our psalter reading for this morning contends, God's steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness extends to all generations. We know these things about God.

But God is also holy, transcendent, and other. God's very nature is righteousness, and God does not tolerate unrighteousness. There is no conflict between the love and the wrath of God. The Bible describes God as a consuming fire, and this analogy helps us put love and wrath together. We know from our own experience that fire can be both a blessing and a curse. It can warm, but it also can burn. The fire does not change. Fire is fire, but whether it warms us or burns us depends on our relation to it. So it is with God. *Judgment comes as a result of our choosing to be related to God wrongly.*

This brings me to my third point this morning. **We have to talk about judgment to do justice to human freedom.** I have had this discussion with some of you lately, a discussion concerning choices and the natural consequences of those choices. God gives us the freedom to choose for or against him. God gives us the freedom to live responsibly and appropriately or irresponsibly and inappropriately. God does not

manipulate us. We are not puppets on a string.

Universalism is the belief that all of us will be saved in the end despite the choices we make, since God is all loving. I desperately want to be a universalist, but I just can't. I can't because this view actually denies our freedom to make the choice for God, since under this view God makes that choice for us in the end. I will allow for the idea, however, that our opportunity to acknowledge Jesus as Savior and Lord does not necessarily end when we die. I am open and quite frankly hoping that even in the afterlife will people be shown the truth and be able to accept it.

If we honestly believed that it doesn't matter whether or not we make a personal decision for Christ, then there would be no need for a personal profession of faith that leads to confirmation in the Church. On the contrary, we believe that the decision to accept Christ and be confirmed in the Church is the single most important decision anyone can make, and the doctrine of judgment stands behind that.

I want to be clear about this, though. Lest I sound like a hellfire and brimstone evangelist who is trying to coerce and manipulate his audience into a salvation experience, I want to make sure you do not hear me saying that the doctrine of the judgment is the *only* thing that stands behind the need to make a personal decision for Christ. We do not choose Christ to avoid going to hell. Let me repeat that. *We do not choose Christ in order to avoid going to hell.* We choose Christ so that in following him, we will discover what authentic life is. You don't get married just to escape being single. We follow Christ for the positive reason of real life, not simply for the negative reason of avoiding

condemnation.

There is, I believe, a fourth reason we have to talk about the judgment. **We have to talk about judgment to do justice to the seriousness of sin.** The Apostle Paul states in 1 Corinthians 15:22 that all who are in Christ will be made alive and all who are in Adam will die. Paul also tells us in Romans 6:23 that the wages of sin is death. Sin carries a price, and the price is judgment. Our best hope to be judged in a favorable light is to believe in, trust, and obey Christ. Our best hope is to have faith in God's own answer to our sin problem, and that answer is Jesus. For as Paul states in 2 Corinthians 5:21, God made him to be sin who knew no sin, namely Jesus, so that in Christ we might become the righteousness of God.

As I stated a moment ago, *God is* righteousness, and he doesn't have to tolerate unrighteousness. Our sin keeps us from being righteous, no matter how hard we try. We simply cannot attain righteousness on our own. But the good news is that we don't have to. Through faith in Christ and *his* righteousness, we are given by God what is called imputed righteousness. We are made righteous ourselves because of Christ's righteousness.

And so fifth and most important I believe, **we have to talk about judgment to do justice to Christ himself.** Our denying of the judgment denies the unique significance of the Christ Event. Christ, after all, is the king. The most crucial fact about judgment, then, is that we are judged in relation to Christ. The judgment and Christ are so bound up together that they cannot be separated. Some people fear that any talk of judgment makes God appear to be conditional. However the New

Testament makes it clear that God's love and grace are, in fact, conditional. There is only one condition, though, and that is a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, following him and his way in all we do.

So what does it mean in our daily living that we are judged in relation to Christ? How do we demonstrate our faith in Christ? Do we show it by having the New Testament memorized? Do we show it by knowing the Apostles' Creed by heart, even if some of us have a brain fade and can't remember the first word of it? Do we show it by having our doctrinal standards straight? Do we show it by being able to share a dramatic account of our conversion experience? Do we show it by having bumper stickers on our car or by listening to contemporary Christian music or by wearing religious t-shirts? Do we show our faith in Christ by coming to church and giving our money? How is our faith in Christ evaluated?

Our passage of scripture from Matthew's Gospel is referred to as the "Sheep and Goats Judgment," the judgment that takes place at the second coming of Christ and that includes all people. This picture of judgment makes it clear what it means to be judged in relation to Christ. *To be judged in relation to Christ means to be judged in relation to people in need.* Our true relationship with him is reflected in our ministry. To serve people in need is to serve Christ and to neglect them is to neglect him. Never does the New Testament allow us to divorce our relationship with Christ from our responsibility to those persons in need around us. Though we are not saved by our works, we are judged by them [Stagg, p. 333]. Hear this, please, if you hear nothing else this morning. *To be judged in relation to Christ means to have our faith*

evaluated by looking at how we treat people who happen to be less fortunate than we are.

The essence of this passage from Matthew is that the ultimate test of a relationship with Christ is the test of life and of love. Those who are his acknowledge that by giving themselves to compassionate ministry, not as those who seek merit, but as those who would express the love for Christ which is in their hearts. On the other hand, those who do not know Christ fail at the point of sympathetic ministry to those who are in need [Summers, p. 151]. I think we need to be reminded on this Sunday before Thanksgiving that we are judged by God, not by the pious prayers we will say over our turkey feasts on Thursday, but by the efforts we have made to insure that no one around us will go hungry while we stuff ourselves with three days worth of food in a single meal.

We have to talk about the judgment. There's no way around it. If you are interested in the bottom line here, then I guess this is it: There will be a final judgment. Make no mistake about it. It will happen, and we will all go through it. *When Jesus returns we will be held accountable for our relationship with him as that relationship is demonstrated by the extent of our compassionate ministry to people in need.* God will respond to us in judgment as we have responded to them in life. May we be ready, then—as individuals, as a church, as a community, and as a nation—for the judgment.