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We are at the last Sunday of ordinary time in the church calendar year. It is time for us to review the teachings of Jesus and to look into our own lives to see what kind of disciples we have become or not become.

Next Sunday, the beginning of Advent, we shall journey along a new path to Bethlehem in order to again discover who we are as the followers of Jesus Christ and who Jesus is.

On this Sunday, the Reign of Christ Sunday or as many of us know it as Christ the King Sunday, we are challenged to watch and pray, be prepared, be alert, and be expectant. Since we have declared ourselves to be followers of Jesus, we assert that we can be all things through Christ who strengthens us. Thus, we are sure that we shall always do what is required of us—watch, pray, be prepared, be alert, be expectant. Are we sure, however, we understand what that means? What will happen when the Judgment comes? Are we ready for the eschaton—the end time?

And I heard a voice crying:

Time shall be no more!

Time shall be no more!

Time shall be no more!

Just last Wednesday evening, Stan Moore led us in Bible study on the last chapters of the Book of Revelation. We talked about the eschaton and the real meaning of “end time.” I was glad that I was present because this Sunday’s scripture lesson like John’s Book of Revelation is about the judgment and the end time. In the Bible study, I was able to widen my understanding of the concept of “end time.”

Our scripture this morning is about the coming of the *Son of Man* with his entourage of angels. It would take about a twelve week class to study what the title *Son of Man* means and another twelve to determine who he is. Since the days of Constantine, the fathers of the church have written great dissertations on the subject and today we are still debating the issue. Therefore, I shall not be so arrogant to try to explain the *Son of Man*. Let us say, however, that in Matthew’s last judgment story, the *Son of Man* is the messiah.

This *Son of Man* separates two sets of people like a shepherd would separate sheep from goats. He places one set on his right and the other on his left. When I was a young lad not knowing the true religious implications of being on the right or left, I vehemently exclaimed, “I don’t want to be a goat.” All that I knew then was that being on the right side was for good people and the left was for bad people. I didn’t know why goats were

declared bad, but I knew that I didn't want to be a goat. In today's world, there are political connotations of right and left. Fortunately they do not equate with religious connotations or I would be in deep trouble.

In all the reading that I have done, I find nowhere in which shepherds care for sheep and goats together. Goats are herded by goat herders and sheep are herded by shepherds. Sheep were considered to be more valuable than goats. Perhaps that is why Matthew has them on the right hand of the *Son of Man* and the less valued goats on the left. I have read an article of why in Hebrew and early Judaic times goats were despised; however, that story is for another time.

In our present story, we have a paradox of unity and disruption. "All the nations" are gathered before the *Son of Man* who now reigns as king. We can suppose that the gathering of all the people on earth was through a summons given by the king. We can also assume that every person on earth is at this unification gathering. Yet, we soon find out that this gathering is not one for the celebration of unification, but for what we quickly surmise is the agony of separation. Unity and disruption at one gathering. It almost sounds like we're in church.

All of us know the next part. "Come you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 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 gave me CLOTHING, I was SICK and you took care OF ME, I was in PRISON and you VISITED ME."

The people on the right are surprised at these remarks of the king. They cannot imagine when the king came into their presence and they ministered to him. They question him, "When did we see you and do all these things?" Imagine a smile coming over the king's face as he says, ". . . as you did it to the least of these, members of my family, you did it to me."

Who are "the least of these?" Again there have been many theological discussions and academic discourses on this subject. Deep in our hearts we know who "the least of these" were/are. Yes, they were/are the missionaries that Christ sent/sends out with hardly much more than the clothes on their backs and the message of God's saving grace in their hearts. They were/are the ones whose stomachs groaned from lack of food and whose throats became parched under the heat of the hot sun. They were/are strangers in strange lands and because of their mission were/are placed in prison for advocating a new way of living. Sometimes they fell/fall ill. Still, they were/are able to established faith communities in the name of the Christ.

And, "the least of these" are people in our present day society who are homeless through foreclosures and other unknown circumstances. Because of the grievous economic situation brought about by selfishness and corporate greed, "the least of these" are the embarrassed and humiliated souls who resort to hunger pantries like the one at this church

to survive until things get better. “The least of these” have lost health care and have fallen physically ill. Some have even lost their faith in God. This has caused them to become so spiritually bankrupt that they now exist as strangers, even on old familiar streets where they live or once lived. “The least of these” are those who are desperately in need of help that is given with love.

So what is it about this parable concerning the Last Judgment that attracts our attention in a prominent way? I believe that the New Interpreter’s Bible has it right in saying, “members of my family” instead of my “brethren,” when the king explains who “the least of these” are. This Son of Man, this Son of God, this Messiah is connected to the Father who welcomes the high and the least into a place beyond time, beyond history. This God, our creating parent, looks upon all of earth as a divinely-made family whose relationship is reveal in love shown to one another.

In the gathering of the peoples from “all the nations” are included the followers of Christ. No one receives a free ticket to pass go or to get out of jail. This apocalyptic drama involves everybody; there are no escape valves. We as Christians more than anybody else probably need to stand before the judgment throne full of fear and trembling. Too many of us have charted our own plan of salvation without the explicit guidance of Jesus Christ.

In studying the end time in Revelation, Professor Moore directed us to Paul’s letter to the Philippians, chapter two which says,

“. . . work your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you to work for his good pleasure” (2:12ff).

We cannot and must not rely on ourselves to ensure our salvation. God will enable us.

The criteria of judgment are not framed in rules and regulations that the church has fashioned for membership and salvation. The Son of Man does not require a confession of faith. There is no mention of justification, forgiveness of sins, or even grace. There seems to be only one criterion of judgment: service to others.

God gave God’s only begotten. If that’s not love, then that’s got to do until the real thing comes along. We all know that that is love. Evidentially, the people gathered on the left of the *Son of Man* were not completely in tuned with the teachings of Jesus. Did not Jesus say, “Love one another as God has loved you?”

The *Son of Man* calls those on his left accursed and bids them to depart from him into the eternal fire. He gives the same scenario to them that he gave to those who are blessed. They are astounded by what they believe to be an incredulous depiction of not being faithful to him. Those who thought that they were faithful to Christ Jesus cannot get over the fact that they are accursed while non-believers are counted among those that are blessed. Maybe they thought that the Parousia—the Second Coming—was not going to

occur in their lifetimes. They did not remain watchful and prayful; they were not prepared to be chosen. They were not alert about who needed their service; they were not expectant.

It would appear that those who lacked the essentials of being true followers of Jesus were placed in the category of sinners. Those who had religious connections were called hypocrites by Jesus. One can hear the words of the Black folk preacher to those who stand at the throne of the Judgment as captured by the poet, James Weldon Johnson from his book of poems called, *God's Trombones*.

Too late sinner! Too late!

Goodbye sinner! Goodbye!

In hell, sinner! In hell!

Beyond the reach of the love of God.