

The Last Sunday of the Church Year/Christ the King, November 22, 2020

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Our Judgment or Christ's?

Matthew 25:31–46

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

Eph 1:2

When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. Before Him will be gathered all the nations, and He will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats (vv 31–32).

As human beings, we constantly make judgments. Daily life is filled with them. Some are judgments about large, important, and life-changing things. Should I take this job? Can I trust this person? Others have to do with matters that are small or trivial. Should I wear this shirt or that one? Chinese or Italian for dinner? Every opinion we form and every decision we make involves a judgment of some kind—judgments about people or places or things. We describe individuals as having good judgment or bad, depending on whether their judgments are wise, well-reasoned, and truthful, or not.

It's easy to be "mistook in our judgments." It's easy to make mistakes in how we judge others, ourselves, and the times in which we live. This is one of the reasons we should take the Eighth Commandment so seriously. It says, "You shall not bear false testimony against your neighbor." We are to put the best construction on everything and explain everything in the kindest way. Making an accurate judgment of life as it happens is hard. That's one of the chief dangers of trying to understand history while you're still living it. First impressions aren't always the most accurate or discerning. Maybe the evidence we're working with is limited. Maybe we're using the wrong criteria. Maybe we're too close to what's going on to get a good perspective. You know the saying, "He missed the forest for the trees"—it's like that. Time and distance have ways of revealing things that aren't visible in the moment. For example, whatever we think today about the coronavirus pandemic or the 2020 election, our thoughts will likely change. We won't see it the same way in the future. People turn out to be different than we thought. Places aren't what we remember them to be. Things are different than they seemed at the time. And even the judgments of history may turn out to be wrong.

So all of *our* judgments, all human judgments made by sinners, are provisional. That includes even our best judgments. What we see now isn't necessarily what it will look like in the end. We're bound by the time and place in which we live. We're stuck in the middle of the story. We don't have the whole picture.

But there is another perspective on all things—including us. There's the perspective of the King whose judgment is just and true and who sees all things in light of eternity. *All* things, not just the big ones—the pandemics and elections. He sees the medium things and the little things, too—like the cup of cold water given to one who thirsts, the diaper changed on the helpless infant or adult, the hand extended in welcome to the stranger, the prayer whispered for the person in need. Beyond our judgments, there's His judgment on the world, on our lives and works, and on the lives and works of all people. When Jesus taught the apostles, He also taught them about the end, the last things—death, judgment, heaven, and hell.

Together with all churches who confess the Augsburg Confession, we believe that “at the end of the world Christ will appear for judgment and will raise all the dead. He will give the godly and elect eternal life and everlasting joys, but He will condemn ungodly people and the devils to be tormented without end” (AC XVII, 1–3). That is, **when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. Before Him will be gathered all the nations, and He will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats** (vv 31–32). This is no parable. It's not a “the kingdom of heaven will be like” story. It's a future event described in apocalyptic language. It's an event that will bring the curtain down on this age when heaven and earth pass away. To that, I say: Bring down the curtain! Oh, let the veil be parted!

King Jesus will make the final judgment, the divine, eternal judgment. For He sees things that we can't see. All hearts are open to Him. Every mind is known to Him. Nothing is hidden from His sight. His judgment isn't narrow or limited, like ours. He has *all* the facts. **“Even the hairs of your head are all numbered”** (Matt 10:30). He sees the whole forest *and* every tree in it. So the only judgment that matters in the end is His—not yours or mine or anyone else's. **“Have no fear of them,”** Jesus says. **“Don't fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear Him who can destroy both soul and body in hell”** (Matt 10:26, 28). We spend far too much time judging others and worrying about how they will judge us, but whatever judgment they make or we make isn't final or eternal. The final judgment belongs to our King.

Our King will come. He will come and sit on His glorious throne. He will judge the nations. But you already know this King. You know who He is. You know what He's done. You know Him because He makes Himself known to you. He makes Himself known in Holy Scripture and in His holy Sacraments. He isn't going to change into something different on the Last Day. He's not one thing in His earthly ministry or the time of the Church and something else when He comes in glory. He is exactly as He has revealed Himself to be. He is who He says He is. The judgment of Scripture is true. **"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever"** (Heb 13:8). So the One on the throne is no stranger.

He's no stranger, but many misjudged Him when He came in the flesh. The Pharisees and the scribes, the Sadducees and the Sanhedrin, the chief priests and Pontius Pilate were all mistaken in their judgments. They judged Him a blasphemer, a law-breaker, a temple-destroyer, one worthy of death—and not just *any* death, but the worst kind of death. Death by crucifixion. Yes, Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews, knows what it is to stand in the dock, to be judged, to be condemned. He has the scars to prove it. He's been through hell, and He wouldn't wish that on anyone. In fact, the eternal fire of hell was never intended for people at all but **"for the devil and his evil angels"** (v 41), as we heard in today's reading.

When King Jesus comes again in glory it won't be to give everyone exactly what they deserve. To do that would be to act as though He had never been crucified, dead, or buried. What we deserve is what He already suffered and bore. No, He will judge not on the basis of works but of faith—of faith in Him. Faith alone saves. That's true now. It's also true at the end. Those who trust in Jesus won't be left hanging. Your faith isn't in vain. Yet, as we also hear, faith is never alone. Faith is living and active. It's busy doing all kinds of things. It's busy listening to Jesus and thinking about others, not about itself. A good tree doesn't think about being a good tree. It doesn't bother making any judgments about itself. It just soaks up the sun and the water and bears good fruit. The same goes for sheep. They don't go around making judgments of themselves or others. They listen to the voice of the Shepherd. They follow Him, and He leads them into green pastures and beside still waters and through the valley of the shadow of death and into life. O sheep, trust the Shepherd to be your judge! Fix your hope on Him!

For this is the judgment Jesus will make: He will separate the sheep from the goats, believers from unbelievers, those who listen to His voice and follow Him from those who merely pay Him lip service while despising His word and follow liars. He knows His own, and to them He says, **"Come, you who are blessed by My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world"** (v 34). They are His not because of anything they've done, but because of what He's done.

I find that what comes next shows how badly I can misjudge the sheep, even myself. Jesus sees what we haven't seen and can't see. He doesn't see our sins, for those are all covered by his righteousness, but He sees all our poor, weak little deeds of mercy. **“For I was hungry and you gave Me food, I was thirsty and you gave Me drink, I was as 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”** (vv 35–36). What's He talking about? When did we do all that? The sheep haven't been trusting in their works. They've just had their eyes and ears fixed on Him. **“Truly, I say to you,”** Jesus says, **“as you did it to one of the least of these My brothers, you did it to Me”** (v 40). These are the works of the King and His kingdom. They are done for Him. They are also done through Him, for He Himself has brought them about.

So our Lord Jesus will remember nothing of our sin, but only the good we've done. He'll recognize and crown with grace the things we never would've dared to plead on our own behalf. All that was bad or broken in our lives—all the judgments we've made and the judgments we've received—they will be as if it all had never been. The Christ is come. In Him the Kingdom long prepared for us has come. In Him we have eternal life. He is our hope of glory.

So, dear sheep, trust His gracious and merciful judgment, not your own. He will evaluate all things—pandemics and elections, past and present, your life and works and mine—and all things will be seen in His light, in the light of Christ, our crucified, risen, reigning, and coming King.

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Phil 4:7
