

“Separating the Sheep and the Goats” based on Matthew 25:31-46 (NRSV)  
Delivered on November 22, 2020 at Absecon Presbyterian Church by Elder Scott Sabo.

I don't know how many of you remember it, but a few years ago, right before Pastor Cobb retired, I did a children's sermon that referenced my favorite line from the movie "Toy Story". In the movie, just when disaster seems imminent, Buzz Lightyear tries to calm everyone down by assuring them "This is no time to panic!"; to which Sheriff Woody replies "this is the PERFECT time to panic!" Now, if that's how we felt a few years ago, before COVID, a contested Presidential election, and the Eagles leading the division with three wins and a tie, how much more relevant is that statement today? We are living in "unprecedented times", according to the mass media, and to everyone on social media. It is easy to let ourselves get overcome with anxiety, and believe that in fact "this is the Perfect time to panic". Those little screens that we look at all the time, and that maybe you are watching me on now, only seem to make it worse. I think of this because currently the members of Session are doing a book study led by Pastor Drew called "Faith for Exiles", that examines how church fits in to our current cultural landscape that is dominated by handheld devices that feed us news, and social media, and videos, and the entire internet at a click. Supposedly, these devices allow us to communicate with anyone, anywhere - and yet somehow paradoxically, we all feel more disconnected despite being more connected. Instead of bringing us closer together and bringing us peace, this technological connectedness seems to be adding to our anxiety. To quote Betty White, "I didn't know what Facebook was, and now that I do know what it is, I have to say, it sounds like a huge waste of time." Yes, I acknowledge the irony of coming to you live on Facebook while I talk trash about Facebook. But stay with me here. If you have ever been on the "Carousel of Progress" at Disney you might recall the joke about how at the early advent of broadcast media, the narrator expects that someday we will all learn math, science, and foreign languages through our televisions, and in the meantime grandma is in the next room watching pro wrestling after grandpa falls asleep. I think we can all agree that we have not yet realized the promise of a connected world where we all communicate better, work together, and support one another assisted by the global networks that we are all plugged in to.

And yet, can we all agree on anything? Now that we are all home so much, it's easy to default to that little screen and start scrolling through your social media feeds. How much of that feed is about collaborating, working together, or building a strong Christian community to support one another "in these unprecedented times"? From what I see, so much of it devolves into likes and dislikes. We find ourselves comparing our jobs, our homes, our vacations (from last year of course), and every aspect of the false version of our lives that we present online to those of our Facebook friends. It becomes an online medium for us to judge one other.

Worse, we use this medium to argue with our "friends" (and I put friends in quotes, because they could be actual real-world friends or somebody we haven't seen since high school). Have you ever won an argument on Facebook? Have you ever been involved in one of these

debates and said “you know what, this random internet contact makes a great point, I’m going to vote for the other guy after all!” I’m guessing you have not. And furthermore, I am guessing that if you are anything like me, these exchanges do not leave you feeling peaceful and fulfilled. More likely they make you frustrated and bitter, and you eventually find yourself angry at your own friends. This is not what God wants for us. Hebrews 10:24-25 instructs us “let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”

So I say all of that to bring us back to today’s Bible lesson, which is the lectionary reading for Christ the King Sunday. Today we celebrate Christ on His throne, as the King of all creation. We know from Revelation 11:15 that there will come a day when that trumpet will sound, and there will be loud voices in heaven, saying “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.” In these unprecedented times, where the governor can cancel our Thanksgiving dinner with a tweet, it is more important than ever to remember that God is, in fact, on His throne. Romans 8:28 tells us “And we know that for those who love God, all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” So we know that God directs all things to happen for our eventual benefit. And yet, did you hear the qualifying statement in that verse? We usually stop paying attention before the part about “for those who are called according to his purpose.” But no worries, because that is us, right? We must be on the good list, and those other people must be the goats. Are we sure of that?

In today’s lesson, which probably sounds familiar, we hear about the Son of Man coming in glory to sort the sheep from the goats. I think that most of the sermons I have heard on this reading focus on what we need to do to get on to the good list and get into heaven. And rightly so, because if you want to get one important piece of information correct from the Bible, that would probably be at the top of the list. And the way to heaven is, of course, through Christ the King; in John 14:6, Jesus tells us “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

And yet, when I stopped to truly listen to the message this week while preparing this sermon, what I heard was not about the sheep and the goats, but about the King who separates them. The sheep and the goats do not separate themselves, only the King can sort them out. He knows his own. The sheep and the goats do not get to judge one another; they have no basis to say “you guys must be the goats”. It is even fair to say from their reactions that the sheep and the goats do not necessarily even know which one they are, as even the righteous question the King “Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and helped you?” Or, for the goats, “when did we NOT help you?” So the sheep and the goats do not have the authority or the understanding to sort themselves or each other as the sheep or the goats. Which brings me to the point that I see in this story – only the King can judge. It is not for us to declare ourselves the sheep, or to designate those who disagree with

us as the goats. Romans 3:23 says “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” ... or, in my translation, there’s at least a little bit of goat in all of us. And since everyone is a creation of our God, that means everyone has at least a little bit of sheep in them as well. First Samuel 16:7 says “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.” Everyone, including the people you argue with about the election on Facebook, could lay claim to being the sheep, as everyone is created in God’s image. Remember, only the King gets to separate the sheep from the goats. I can’t stress this enough. Luke 6:37 tells us “Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven”. As you can see, it turns out there are a lot of verses in the Bible that tell us that ours is not to judge; I further propose to you that it will probably please the King if we stop and leave the judgement to him. It might even lower your anxiety level in the meantime.

Instead, accepting that we are all subjects of the one Christ the king, let us work together and build one another up, not just within our church but within all of God’s kingdom. The book study that I mentioned earlier spends a significant number of pages discussing studies and examples that show what we intuitively believe already - that we all work better when we work together. Much of the teaching of the early church, and the letters of Paul, is encouragement to Christian believers to build one another up, not to judge each other or tear others down. Our job is to care for one another, to bring people to Christ, and to work together for the glory of Christ’s kingdom. As Paul the Apostle writes in First Corinthians 1:10 “I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.”

My brothers and sisters, we need to collaborate. Proverbs 27:17 says “Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another.” We can make each other better and stronger rather than tearing each other down. Ephesians 4:29 tells us to “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.” We need to work together, to share, to communicate, and to grow our community of believers. To truly listen with an open mind, not just as a springboard for formulating our rebuttal argument. “Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing” First Thessalonians 5:11 tells us.

The power of a church is not in the building, or the events, or the programs. It is in the growing community of believers that works together, in acceptance and love, and reserving judgement, to support one another and work for the kingdom of God. Paul says in Romans 12:4 “For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.”

One final point that struck me in the book study was about communication, not just with each

other, but with God. We communicate with God through prayer, and I was struck by the question posed by the author -“do you pray, or do you say your prayers?” Now, having come from a tradition where a certain number of “Hail Marys” is prescribed as penance, I had a moment of clarity at this point. So I have been working hard to stop just saying my prayers, and intentionally communicate with God when I pray. As I started to work on this sermon, I tried to clear my mind and focus on the reading, and listening for God’s guidance about what to share with you today. “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it” we are told in Luke 11:28. So I tried to stop the noise that is always taking up my attention, and listen for that still, small voice. Stop the noise. Stop, and listen. Stop..... and listen. Stop.... Collaborate... and Listen. And just like that, my stupid brain was sabotaging my efforts to focus on bringing you an inspiring message, and instead was regurgitating bad 80’s rap music. (That’s Vanilla Ice’s #1 hit single “Ice Ice Baby” if you are fortunate enough to NOT get the reference.)

And yet, as God works in mysterious ways, this ties together the points that I have attempted to share with you today. And if a sample of Queen’s “Under Pressure” helps you to remember these points, then so be it.

My Brothers and Sisters, I leave you today with Stop, Collaborate, and Listen.

- Stop judging; only the King can separate the sheep from the goats
- Collaborate; work together to build each other up into a strong and growing community of believers, working always together for the kingdom of God.
- and Listen; listen to each other, and listen for the word of God in the still small voice that guides us, even where you least expect it

Amen

# Word Search Puzzle

from Pinawa.Church/puzzles (use for free distribution only)  
words in a straight line left to right or top to bottom

N A T I O N S T H E M Y H P U T P D M S  
B U T V I S I T E D T F I R E O U E E T  
H U N G R Y O U H A N D M E M O N V M R  
T H E N R I G H T E O U S P A K I I B A  
W N A K E D F R O M B Y I A N A S L E N  
E S H E E P D E P A R T N R S N H F R G  
L F G O A T S I C K W E H E W G M O S E  
C A R E P G L O R Y O L E D E E E U O R  
O M S H E P H E R D R L R D R L N N M C  
M I D R I N K B W L L H I N M S T D E L  
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D Y E U R A H E L A A S L T T I E T H T  
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Y T H E S E A L L G A T H E R E D N T E  
A C C U R S E D I D S B E F O R E E H Y

Words in the puzzle are printed in **bold italic**.

(Matthew 25:31-46 NRSV) "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. 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, and he will put the ***sheep*** at his right hand and the ***goats*** at the left. 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***; 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, 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.' 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? And ***when*** was it that we saw you a stranger and ***welcomed*** you, or naked and gave you ***clothing***? And when was it that we saw you ***sick*** or in prison and visited you?' 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.' 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***; for I was ***hungry*** and you gave me no food, I was ***thirsty*** and you gave me ***nothing*** to drink, 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.' 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?' ***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.' And these will go ***away*** into eternal ***punishment***, but the righteous into eternal ***life***."