

Matthew 25:31-46

Later this week Santa Claus will be arriving in a number of shopping malls in the area. Children will line up to sit on his lap and tell him what they want for Christmas. But there is a catch. He is going to ask each boy and girl if they have been good all year. And if they lie he will know it, because Santa is aware of who's naughty and who's nice.

And that's sort of how our text for today reads. When the Son of Man comes in His glory, He will separate those who are naughty from those who are nice. He won't ask us if we have been good. He knows. The nice people will be placed on His right. These are those who gave food to the hungry; who clothed the naked; who welcomed strangers; who visited the sick and those in prison. "Come," He will say to these, "Inherit the Kingdom prepared for you." These will receive all the presents, but the naughty won't receive any. They will be placed on the left and be told that because they weren't nice; because they did not give food and drink to those in need, or welcome strangers, or visit the sick and those in prison, they will get something even worse than a lump of coal in their stocking...they will go away into eternal punishment; but the nice into eternal life.

If you think this is silly...think again, because this pretty much sums up the religion of most people. Most have a "Santa Claus" understanding of God, and they have a "naughty and nice" understanding of people. Nice people go to heaven; naughty people don't. And so for most there is no desire for Holy Baptism; no hunger for the words of Christ and His flesh and blood; there is simply the goal to live not as those who are naughty, but as those who are nice because nice people, after all is said and done, go to heaven.

And Jesus' words in Matthew 25 seem to support this. A quick reading of the text suggests that God is like Santa; that the sheep are the nice people, and the goats are those who are naughty. And if this is true, then you have no need of a pastor; all you need is a coach—someone to stand up here and encourage you to be nice. If being nice gets you the reward of eternal life, then you don't need a pastor to nourish you with Jesus' Word and Sacraments; all you need is a motivator to inspire you to avoid being naughty in life so that on the Last Day you will join the sheep on Jesus' right and not be placed with the goats.

If we, however, want the truth of what our Lord is saying to us here in Matthew 25, a quick reading of His words will not do. We must look deeply at them and connect them to the rest of the Scriptures. And looking deeper at these words of Christ we see, for one thing, that the sheep are unaware that they have been nice. When little children disobey in April, Mom and Dad may remind them that Santa is coming and he knows if they're behaving or not, so if they want presents in December, they had better shape up and start obeying. And this may actually work. Children behave throughout the year in order to receive the reward at Christmas time. But this is not so with Jesus' sheep. When He comes in glory and tells the sheep: Come, for you did all these nice things to Me, the sheep will respond, "We did? When? We had no idea!" The sheep are not nice in order to get into heaven. They did all those nice things to Jesus not for reward, but because that's what sheep do.

It's like an apple tree. Apples do not grow on an apple tree in order to make it an apple tree. They grow because it is an apple tree. Apples do not make an apple tree; rather, an apple tree makes apples. Just so, good works and being nice to Jesus do not make you a sheep. Rather, because you are a sheep, this is how you live. The fruits of faith in your life

are evidence of who you are. But in goats these fruits of faith are lacking. If a tree is not an apple tree, it will not produce apples no matter how hard it tries. The goats will have no evidence of faith in Christ because there is no faith in the goats. No apples except on apple trees; no fruits of faith except in Jesus' sheep.

Friend, you don't have to live a certain way in order to be called one of Jesus' sheep; but because you are one of His sheep through Baptism and His Word and Sacrament, you live the way you do. The evidence of your faith and love for Christ is seen in your life. Your works do not cause you to belong to Jesus. Rather, because you belong to Jesus, good works come forth in how you live.

And what's more, heaven is yours even before you produce good works in your life. Children may have the idea that Santa will not set aside any presents for them unless and until they behave throughout the year. But in Matthew 25 Jesus tells the sheep, "Come... inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." Your being nice doesn't get you into heaven. Heaven was yours even before you were born. Before the world's foundation was laid, Jesus laid aside for you a place with Him forever. Your Christian life does not gain you that place. It is, rather, evidence that you as a sheep belong to Jesus, who out of grace, has given you that place with Him.

But looking now even more closely at Jesus' words in our text, we see something very interesting. The sheep are given a place in heaven because they were "nice" to Jesus. How? By being "nice," He says, to "the least of these My brothers." Why not "sisters?" Why only "brothers?" Because His brothers are those who preach His Word. Throughout the Gospel of St. Matthew the phrase, "My brothers," always refers to those who hold the preaching office—Jesus' Apostles, and those who come after them. These brothers of Jesus are not anyone special by their own right, but "He who listens to you, "Jesus tells them, "Listens to Me; and whoever rejects you, rejects Me."

So how do Jesus' sheep live? They respect those brothers of Jesus who bring to them His Word and Sacraments. They care for their needs. They pay attention to their message. The goats do not care about Christ's brothers, but the sheep do. Even the least of them. Even that brother of Jesus who is unknown to the world; who is as sinful as his congregation; who is no great preacher and teacher; but because he is Jesus' brother who faithfully gives God's Word and Sacraments, Jesus' sheep listen to him, and care for his needs, and respect him. And doing this, Jesus says, "You did it unto Me."

There is a word which Jesus' brothers said over and over again to the sheep, which Jesus on the Last Day will also say to them. The word is "Come." Again and again Jesus' brothers invite the sheep to come and drink of the water of life. "Come to the Lord's House and be fed the Bread of life. Come to the marriage feast. Come to God's Table and eat of the body and blood of Christ. Come." And Jesus' sheep come. The goats do not come. They depart from such an invitation. But the sheep, over and over, come throughout their life. They come because of who they are—Jesus' sheep. "My sheep hear My voice, "He says, "And they follow Me." When Jesus stands upon the earth in glory, He will simply repeat that same word to the sheep. To the goats who departed from Jesus' words throughout their life, He will say, "Depart from Me, you cursed ones." But to the sheep who heeded His invitation to come throughout their life, He will say, "Come, you who are blessed by My Father."

As sheep we know that we deserve the same fate as the goats. Not one of us deserves a place in heaven. But we also believe that Jesus became cursed for us. He took the curse we deserved. He took your sins and eternal punishment. And you belong to Him. You are His sheep not because you always live so well. You are His sheep because Jesus forgives you, and this you believe. Let not even one of you think that you are a goat. Even if you have lived like a goat, Jesus died for you. He loves you as a beloved sheep. His word to you today is not, "Depart from Me," but "Come unto Me!" Come and believe that His words of life are for you. "Come," He says to each one of you. No matter how you have lived; no matter what you have done in your life, His word "Come," is in your ear today. Do not believe that you are a goat. As sheep, hear His word "Come," for He comes to you now with grace and forgiveness so that on the Last Day you may, rejoicing, hear Him say to you: Come, you who are blessed by My Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. Amen.