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Woodhaven Presbyterian Church  
Christ the King Sunday – Nov 23, 2008  
Ezekiel 34:11-16, Matthew 25:31-26:4

### Holy Insistence and Holy Imagination

Perhaps you have not noticed yet, but Christmas and holiday decorations have flooded the stores! It is not even Thanksgiving, and Christmas carols are already being piped through store speakers. Shopping malls are gearing up for what they hope will be a holiday rush. They hope that their cash registers will soon be ringing with false cheer. Sisters and brothers : The holidays are beginning.

That's why these texts from Ezekiel and Matthew are so good for our hearts, minds and souls. For biblical texts about judgment are always a challenge. Texts about judgment force us to move through the layers of falsely sweet holiday sentimentality to the beating heart of the matter. Texts about judgment force us to stop the frantic holiday "you are what you consume" pace. At least for a moment, texts such as these in Ezekiel and Matthew stop us dead in our tracks.

Allow me to begin at the end. Both of these scriptures, though abruptly harsh when first encountered, are inviting us to experience the **love** of the Lord, not God's condemnation. In both Ezekiel and Matthew, we see a holy insistence that it is not because we have earned value that we are loved; but rather, because we are loved by God, we have value. Our value as children of God is a gift and not an earned credit. That point, in and of itself, is a counter-cultural statement.

We first see a glimpse of God's holy insistence of our worth in the passage from Ezekiel. Ezekiel paints an image of God who makes the first move and seeks us out, not the other way around. "For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out." According to Ezekiel, we are so lost that God must take the trouble to find and rescue us. And astonishingly, God is more than willing.

The first brush strokes of Ezekiel's picture paint good news. It is good news that God wants to find us, feed us, wipe away our tears, and bind up our wounds. It is good news that God wants to gather us in when we are lost and scattered. It is good news that God wants to take us to a place where we can relax and be calm, rather than fretfully run to and fro in a state of panic and fear. Ezekiel's first brush strokes paint a picture of such good news.

But then, Ezekiel keeps painting his picture and we start to see a more complex image of God's holy insistence. As God is going about this kind of gracious shepherding, God is also going about the business of sorting out the sheep. Separating the fat and strong sheep from the weak ones. As God seeks and finds, God is also making judgments. Sorting out one from another.

Does that image stop you in your little sheep tracks? That is that judgment part of the text about which some of us, your pastor included, don't like to talk or think. And perhaps we don't like to think about God's judgment because we are scared we will be found to be on the wrong side of

things. Perhaps it is our fear that keeps us from pondering this scene. Or, maybe the beating heart of the matter is something else.

What if our distaste about God's judgment stems not so much from a fear of being found on the wrong side; but instead, our distaste comes from an unspoken feeling that God is stepping onto our turf? Let's be honest. Don't we all consider it more our prerogative to label and condemn?<sup>1</sup> To sort and to judge? We certainly act like it sometimes.

Just remember back a month or so to all the different rhetoric that swirled around, perhaps that came out of our own mouths, about candidates in the last election. I would be willing to bet that many of us, if we are honest, have to acknowledge that we made judgment calls about different people, friends included, depending on how they were going to cast their vote. I understand some preachers were doing the same thing from their pulpits.

But we do not only do that kind of judging and sorting in our worldly arenas. This same kind of judging and sorting process happens in the church all the time, especially when the church is deciding some important issue or debating a hot-topic question.

We all do it—even those of us who claim to be nonjudgmental. Before we really listen to someone, before we decide to hear his or her story, before we even bother to see a person as a child of God, with the face of Christ, we want to know if he or she is liberal or conservative, Democrat or Republican, gay or straight, Christian or not. Only then, after we have properly judged and sorted the other, do we decide to either invest our time in listening and seeing, or not.

Brother Ezekiel calls us on this folly. He says we are ridiculous with all this. Just ridiculous because we are **all** lost sheep, running to and fro, panicky in the dark storm. Ezekiel insists that judgment belongs only to God, and clearly God's concerns are not our own. When God starts sorting out the flock, it is not to divide the pure sheep from the sinful sheep. God doesn't insist on a litmus test based on political convictions or theological viewpoints.

No, according to Ezekiel's picture, in the time of judgment, the only thing God is interested in is seeing what the rest of the sheep refused to see. As God moves about the mountains, gathering the sheep and bringing them home, God is very particular about seeking out the weak ones who have lived their lives being butted and battered trying to get to the feed trough.

Ezekiel's picture of God's judgment is a picture of a Holy Shepherd who is fiercely compassionate for those who have been wounded by the selfish actions of others. A God who is fiercely protective of those deemed weak and insignificant by the strong. A God who is fiercely determined to reveal the value of those we simply judged and sorted out as not being worth our time or energy. This is the strange sorting out of the sheep in Ezekiel's story of God. This is the picture of judgment. A picture of God' holy insistence of love and justice for all the sheep. And how we, lost sheep ourselves, have judgment all wrong.

Matthew paints a similar kind of picture. We see similar paint strokes of holy insistence in Matthew's scene of judgment. In this scene, we see Jesus as King—victorious over all creation.

Like the holy shepherd in Ezekiel, Jesus is also about the business of gathering, sorting, and judging.

And if you listened carefully to the picture that Matthew paints, you realized that, similar to the holy Shepherd, judgment is once again not related to the things we might choose. Christ's judgment is not at all like the kinds of sorting and judging we do with each other every day.

In this passage, once again it appears that judgment is not related to one's theology, or one's political affiliations, or even to one's profession of faith. **Both** the sheep **and** the goats call Jesus "Lord." That is not what Christ the King is concentrating on as he does his sorting and judging work. We don't even see the word "sin" in this entire picture of judgment.

No, judgment here in Matthew 25 seems to be all about one thing: God's holy insistence on imaginative living. Did you live so imaginatively that when you saw the face of a weak sheep, you saw Christ present in that face? Did you use the gift of holy imagination so that you saw that person, perhaps one who had been butted and battered most of his or her life, as a child of God, equal of value to you, a member of God's family?

Or, were you spiritually lazy, one who gave into the temptation of slothful living by failing to exercise the hard work of God's imagination? As Fred Craddock preaches, "Did you see a starving child... with a swollen stomach and say, 'well it's not my kid.' Did you look at a recent widow, sitting by herself on the pew...and say, 'It's not my mom.' Or did you pass by an [addict] sitting in a wheelchair on the side of road with a cardboard sign and say 'Well, that's not my dad, [or my brother or my sister or my friend].'"<sup>ii</sup>

The judgment of Matthew 25 centers around God's insistence of holy imagination. God's remarkable gift to us that allows us to see Christ in each other, in ourselves, even in the weakest sheep around. How do we use that gift? Do we use it? Or do we give into spiritual laziness, look out upon the world and everything God has made and say, "I don't care." "It's not my problem." Do we lazily say "I don't see how I could do anything about it," as we hum the strains of White Christmas and listen to the jingle of the cash registers, trying to save our nation by spending our money.

By the way, it is interesting to note that both the sheep and the goats were surprised in this parable. No one expected King Jesus to go about the business of sorting and judging the way he did. The goats sure didn't. They were completely surprised to learn that by ignoring the strangers, the sick, the imprisoned, they had indeed ignored Christ himself. If they had known, they would have acted very differently.

The goats' shock reminds me of another story that Fred Craddock tells. He had preached four nights in Atlanta at a big church with a good crowd. There was a moment in each service where, like our time of greeting here, they had a time of Christian fellowship. And Craddock says that you have never seen such hugging and carrying on in your life—people going across the room, up and down the aisles, shaking hands, hugging, laughing. Apparently it was really something. On the last night, after the last service, the pastor of that church took Fred and his wife for

coffee. The pastor said to them, “Did you ever see such a family church? Did you ever see such love in your life in a church?” Fred’s wife said, “Yeah, well, yeah. I have.” The pastor said, “What do you mean?” She responded, “I was there for all four services, and nobody ever spoke to me.” And do you know what the pastor said in response? He said, “Well, that was because they didn’t know who you were.”<sup>iii</sup> “Lord, when did we see YOU and not care for you?” the goats ask, totally and completely surprised.

But even the **sheep** were surprised by the way King Jesus went about this sorting and judging business. Clearly, they were not going through their lives, calculating their actions based on some notion of future reward. They were not trying to earn their way into heaven by what they did. Why, apparently, they were just living life, actively using their God-given holy imaginations, remembering God’s holy insistence that all are of value to God for all are loved by God, and that God is the judge, not the sheep.

One final note: We also might want to notice that this holy imagination and this insistence that all are valued because all are loved, this insistence that the holy Shepherd is the one in charge of gathering and sorting, and that the Slain Lamb will be both judge and jury—well, if we decide to live this way, we might want to watch our back. For, according to Matthew, as soon as Jesus painted this picture for the crowd, people in positions of power started plotting. People who were offended that God was stepping on their turf of judgment started creating the plans for his arrest and execution. This kind of preaching and living started the construction of his cross.

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<sup>i</sup> Norris, Kathleen. “Imagining Christ.” Christian Century, November 15, 2005. page 18. Her thesis about spiritual imagination is woven throughout this sermon. I am greatly indebted for having this article as a conversation partner with these texts!

<sup>ii</sup> A paraphrase of a story from Fred Craddock, quoted in Norris’ article.

<sup>iii</sup> Craddock, Fred. Craddock Stories Ed: Mike Graces and Richard Ward. Page 45.