

The Great Divide – Matthew 25:31-46

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We're a month past Halloween now. And I suspect that after trick-or-treating this year all the kids brought their buckets or bags of candy inside and did what we did as kids: dump it all out on the kitchen table, assess your loot, and sort it.

You divide the chocolate from the hard candy, perhaps, or the big pieces from the smaller pieces, or, most likely, the favorable candy from the unfavorable. You divide it into piles and then make a plan with what you're going to do: put the favorites in a special container and hide it from the rest of your family? Then take the least favorable candy and offer it for everyone to have? Or, as mom or dad would probably suggest, just go ahead and throw the unfavorable candy in the trash right away?

Like piles of Halloween candy, we sort or divide so many items we have into piles or groups. And they're almost always divided according to preference.

At my house, now more than a year since I've moved there, I'm once again going through things I have and that I haven't touched in the last year. And I'm making piles: piles of things to keep and piles of things to give away or throw away: furniture, kitchen items, decorations, clothes. I did this in mass a year ago, and I'm doing it again—taking another assessment of my stuff. And while it's hard to consider parting with our stuff, the act of sorting or dividing reminds us of the things we consider valuable and the things we really can live without.

The process of dividing Halloween candy or our material possessions seems healthy and noble. It's a credible and admirable way of arranging our lives. And yet, there are others acts of dividing that seem divisive.

We speak so much here at the church of the power and necessity of unity and finding community. And that's important at any level within our society. Too often, we're a divided bunch. We're divided by theology, politics, ideology, and social issues. And not always is there someone

dividing us, but often there is: politicians, commentators, social media warriors. And this kind of dividing is harmful to our collective well-being.

Here in Matthew 25, Jesus speaks of himself as a divider, a separator. And in reading this entire text, this divider is both rewarding and punitive. He speaks of himself returning and separating people from each other, “as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats...the sheep at his right and the goats at his left.” The sheep will inherit the kingdom of God and the goats will enter “into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”

It’s not really warm and fuzzy language, is it? In fact, it’s language we typically associate with kings that rule with an iron fist.

It’s Christ the King Sunday (how many of you got up this morning to go to church because it’s Christ the King Sunday?).

There are many labels that have historically been applied to Jesus. Jesus as King as been always one of the most used.

We refer to Jesus as Lord so often—in our prayers, in our liturgy, and even in our mental image of who God is. Beyond everything else, we all just seem to want to know that somebody’s in charge. And kings historically leave no doubt as to who’s in charge.

The problem we have is that we all know of so many earthly kings who are corrupt because of their power. And sometimes that taints our view of who Jesus is and how he operates.

And when he then speaks here of the goats being tossed into the eternal fire of hell at his behest, it makes us and many others uneasy.

The book I’m using as the basis for my Sunday School class right now is by the pastor and author Brian McClaren, titled *A Generous Orthodoxy*. In the book, McClaren makes the case for a radical, Christ-centered orthodoxy of faith and practice, but with a missional and generous spirit.

And to make the case for this kind of orthodoxy, he highlights the necessity of it by using so many popular images of Jesus as those that impede one’s ability to believe in and follow Jesus.

And one of those images he highlights is that of which we’ve just been speaking: Jesus as Lord or king.

“Lord means *master*, and there are at least three senses of the word *master* that apply to Jesus. First, *Lord* suggests *authority or kingship*.

Whenever we use those words, we face the problem that for contemporary people these words all feel archaic—quaintly archaic or barbarously archaic. Associating a king with nondemocratic and corrupt regimes or with symbolic monarchies without much real power, it's so hard, impossible, for us to have a feel for the word *king* even remotely similar to what people would have felt in Bible times.

“People who lived in that time knew explicitly what it meant to live in times of perpetual violence, horrific brutality, ever-present danger, and constant vulnerability to whichever warlord threatened them. Under those circumstances, we can imagine what good news it would be that a good king had come into power.

Today, though, when we use the word sovereignty (another form of kingship), we think of sovereignty as being “absolute control, and *control*, as we all know, is a tricky word. We don't want to be controlled; there are already so many forces trying to control us that we don't want one in our God.

That is, unless we seek a leader (a *Lord*) who seeks to liberate us from all the forces that, corruptively, try to imprison us. We do seek a king whose goal it is to destabilize the status quo and “make way for a better day,” as McClaren puts it.

To call Jesus “Lord” is different than calling Caesar Lord, or the oppressive ruler of the day. It means that there is a power in Jesus that is more important than the power of the king of the greatest political state today. It reaffirms the authority of a “powerless” Jewish rabbi “with scarred feet over the power of Caesar himself with all his swords, spears, chariots, and crosses.”

“Jesus' kingdom, then, is a kingdom not of oppressive control but of dreamed-of freedom, not of coercive dominance but of liberating love, not of top-down domination but of bottom-up service, not of a clenched iron fist but of open, wounded hands extended in a welcoming embrace of kindness, gentleness, forgiveness, and grace.”

Second, Lord suggests *a master in relation to a servant or slave*. And Jesus takes the image of master-slave relations (troublesome historically)

and deconstructs it, turns it inside out, empties it of old meaning and refills it with new meaning, and thus redefines and revolutionizes it.

At one point, Jesus said to his disciples, “I no longer call you servants, but friends. He shows how to be a king by serving others (washing their feet, for example). And the commands this king gives are not meant to oppress but to lift up—Love your neighbors as yourselves.

And the third meaning of *Lord* grows from the first two: *Lord also means a master-teacher or rabbi*, one who tells us what to do and how to live.

And that definition of Lord brings us back to our text from Matthew today. What gets lost or overshadowed by the language of separation and division that Jesus uses here is the criteria for how the goats will be separated from the sheep. The division occurs not by chance. It’s not based on randomness, and it’s not about who believes in Jesus or who believes in him the most. No, there is a practical formula for deciding who goes where. And it’s centered on how we behave toward the less fortunate, and ultimately then, how we treat Jesus.

If we’re feeding the hungry and giving drink to the thirsty, and if we’re clothing the naked and taking care of the sick, we’re then doing the same to Jesus and will therefore find reward. But if we’re not doing those things and, therefore not treating Jesus in the same way, we’ll find ourselves without reward. It’s so important that Jesus defines the consequence of not doing so as eternal punishment.

This past Monday, some other Presbyterian pastors and I were invited to meet with Dr. Robert Gamble, a PCUSA pastor and missionary, who has been working with orphans in Ukraine for the last 17 years. In fact, out of nothing, he formed a ministry there called This Child Here. And of course, with the war in Ukraine that has broken out over a year ago, the ministry has shifted to caring for mothers and their children fleeing the war front on the eastern side of the country. Their camps and programs they have carried out for orphans has expanded to include these mothers and their children (the fathers of whom stayed behind to fight in the military or work jobs essential to the war effort).

Gamble and his team over there are doing exactly what Jesus lauded in this text today: caring for the hungry, thirsty, naked, and sick.

This is what Jesus as king is all about. It's not about him wielding power over all his subjects and acting authoritatively without reason. No, for this king, what matters is how his servants treat each other. He wants what's best for all his children.

"The blessed ones are those who have seen a King who is not like the kings of this world. They are blessed because they know a King who brings real peace, who sees the needy, and who hears the cries of the oppressed. In God's kingdom, no one is hungry, naked, sick, or alone. To bear witness to Christ as King is to be a messenger of this kingdom—to serve others and thereby profess the invasion of God's glorious empire."
(Carla Works, *Working Preacher*)

With that in mind, Jesus' dividing here isn't about punishing. It's about lifting one another up. And that lifting up should come from us all—servants, slaves, subjects, whatever you want to call us. That's because we are all Jesus' *beloved* subjects.