

Christ the King Sunday – November 23, 2008  
The Rev. Dr. Charles D. Bang

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour,  
Jesus Christ. Amen.

It all depends on what kind of God you have. If you've been around these parts for any length of time, you will have heard these words come out of my mouth at one time or another. As a matter of fact, I found myself using these words on two occasions in the past week. The first was with a person who was asking me a question about scripture and the second was in this past Monday morning's bible study group. The occasion for its use there was set within the context of our examining the book of Isaiah.

On both occasions, I used the phrase because the discussion hovered around the topic of salvation and how God comes to offer it to us and what is required on our part to receive it.

In today's gospel lesson, as in those of weeks' past, the tenor of all the year's end readings focus on the end of time, the return of Jesus and the attendant

judgment of humanity by both God and Christ and the language is both disturbing and hard to hear. Last week the gospel reading ended with, *“and there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”* And then, in a kind of ironic twist, the preacher continues, “the gospel of the Lord.” The two seem somehow at odds.

And again, this morning, 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....” The Gospel of the Lord.

For those of us who presume that we are the good guys and that all those others who have in some way disappointed us, or hurt us or have done evil things, or who are perennially or perpetually selfish or narcissistic to a fault, the passage may seem like justice, until we stop for that awkward moment and think on those times when we have neglected to feed the hungry and provide for those who thirst, or visit the sick or the imprisoned, and then all of a sudden the passage doesn't sound so good to us. When we think of those occasions when we have put our own best interest ahead of someone else's, or when we've said, “I don't care what they think,” or, “I don't care what happens to them,” then the business

of God deciding who goes into the sheep pile and who goes into the goat pile doesn't seem to be all that attractive a scenario.

So we read a passage like the one we have before us this morning and we start to take a mental inventory of our lives. And after looking at the whole of it, and coming to the conclusion that we could have done better, we start that inevitable rationalization that human beings are so good at, we say, "Well, when I was young, and didn't know anything, how I treated my younger brother and my sisters doesn't really count, because in those formative years that's what you learn, right? And the years I was a teenager, well, you have to discount those, because all teenagers are selfish and egocentric. And then when you get to college, and the first years in your first job, you're trying to prove yourself and make a name for yourself, and so, it's only natural that you would concentrate and your needs and what it takes for you to get noticed and how you set yourself apart from the crowd. And then when your past that and firmly established, well, then you focus on your family and then as you get older, you start to think more about your retirement and your own health. And then in the twilight of your years, well, by then you're convinced that the world has gone to hell in a hand-basket anyway and so it's every man for himself.

Well, if sheep eat grass and goats eat garbage, based on that assessment of my own life and behavior, I might as well start dumpster diving right now.

And that's precisely the point, isn't it? If it depended on us, and how we act and how we behave and how we treat one another and how we are calloused toward war and poverty and famine and AIDS and drought and genocide and terrorism until it happens to us, then, I dare say, my friends in faith and failure, that there isn't much hope that we'd be on Santa's list of good boys and girls, no less God's.

So, like I said, it all depends on what kind of God you have. That certainly is not to say that God is defined by what we think, or by our image of God, that would be idolatry of the first order. But our image of the kind of God we have can and does influence our world view and certainly our place within it. If the image of God your personal piety projects is a judging, wrathful, angry God, then that will color if not affect how you look at the world and your particular place within it and within the creation God has placed you. How you look at your life and at what happens to you along the way will also be a victim of this mindset. Fear is a great motivator, but it is short lived. Love, by far, is the greater motivator, it might not work as quickly, but its effects are longer lasting. *"For God so loved the world,"* is

not just some motto that gets scrawled on highway overpasses and stadium walls and inscribed on pencils you buy at the Christian bookstore. “For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son that all who believed on his name should not perish but have eternal life,” manifests a mindset and a piety and a world view that describes a God who loves His creation and holds His children dear.

And that changes how I look at the world, and my life, and what happens to me and to be honest, how I look at you. If I see in you that cherished, loved, and redeemed person whom God loves, it can’t help but affect how we deal with one another, how we treat each other, and ultimately, will be the determining factor in whether or not, when you see me hungry, or thirsty or I, you, that the offer of food, or drink, or hospitality or compassion or love is extended or withheld.

Whether you voted for President Elect Obama or not, one of the things that happened with his election, is that it changed the way people look at things; it changed the way you look at the presidential office, it changed the way you look at political process, it changed the way a good portion of the world look at Americans, it changed the way some white Americans look at black Americans

and it changed the way some black Americans look at white Americans and quite frankly how they look at themselves. While his election doesn't change everything, it certainly changes the way we look at what's possible in our country. What remains to be seen is how he and we will respond to this change and what we do with the possibilities and challenges that loom before us in this new world.

When the Lion got his courage and the scarecrow his brain and the tin man his heart, reality didn't change but their and our perception of it did. So also, our perception of the world in which we live and of those with whom we share it is changed by the image of God we hold in our hearts and our brains and our courage. The reality of who we are may still remain the same, but you are a different person for me if I can see God in you and I will respond to your need as I would hope you would respond to mine because of this image of God that we share.

In the gospel reading, when Jesus spoke about the difference between the sheep and the goats, this is what he was talking about. When you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.

Amen.