

THE MYSTERY BEHIND OUR SALVATION

Matthew 25:1-46

Sermon Preached by Dr. Cahill

Babcock Presbyterian Church

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Since we live in a world with multiple expressions of faith and practice, some of them claiming to be the only way to God and eternal salvation the question is, "Who placed the bet on the winning horse?"

According to some Christians, God only loves and accepts born again Christians. There are also religious non Christians in the world who'd say the same thing about their own religion: "We won the lottery and unless you become one of us the rest of you are going straight to hell."

An angel composed what she entitled the Heavenly Anthem, her gift to humankind. After gathering up all the sheets of her manuscript she rushed down to earth clutching it tight in her arms until a sudden gust of wind blew the unfinished composition out of her grasp causing all the sheets of music to tumble down every which way to the earth. Random people started picking up a sheet of music here and there and soon enough all of them were declaring, "I have the heavenly anthem!" while others shouted back, "No you don't, I have the heavenly anthem," none of them realizing each one only had a piece of it.

Some of you may be thinking, "Preacher, you're not suggesting Christianity is only a piece of it and is therefore on an equal par with all the other world religions, are you? I think you'd be treading on very thin ice."

What I'd answer is Christ himself is unequalled. He's the King of Kings and Lord of Lords and when the time comes he alone will return in his glory to judge all the nations of the earth. I'd also answer that I believe with all my heart that the doctrines or teachings of Christianity, which were painstakingly mined from our Scriptures by the early Church Fathers, are God's most clear and concise revelation of himself anyone had ever been given.

However, I'd also answer that if Christ returned to earth today, unannounced, he'd have a lot to say about what passes for standard Christian belief and practice. It's a sure bet Jesus would be just as frustrated and critical for what passes as orthodoxy today as he was with the scribes and Pharisees, the religious establishment of his day. They thought they had God's will all figured out and they were so sure of themselves they built up walls dividing the so called righteous from the so called unrighteous. They became so obsessed with keeping themselves clean and pure they missed the point entirely: God's people are expected to live faithfully and obediently by pursuing justice and peace in the world as we patiently wait for the imminent coming of the Kingdom of God.

Maybe you're now wondering, "What does he mean by pursuing justice and peace? It sounds like he means being a 'do-gooder' to the exclusion of having a personal saving relationship with Jesus Christ."

To that I'd answer, quite the contrary, the two go hand and hand, you can't have one without the other. The best part of you is Christ living in you and you can only have Christ living in you by accepting his offer of friendship and then do your part nurturing a deep and growing relationship with him. When that happens, the believer is necessarily compelled to be a do-gooder not just for yourself but for others, particularly those Jesus called "the least of these."

Having said that, getting back to the point of the story of the Heavenly Anthem, everybody of all faiths, including the Christian, needs to realize God is bigger and more wonderful than any of our puny perceptions of God.

Which then brings us back to the original question, "Who placed the winning bet on the right horse, the Muslims, the Hindus, the Buddhist, the Christians?" In other words, who's going to be saved and what's the one and only formula for salvation?"

I think we'll find food for thought to move us in the right direction in Matthew's parable of the Last Judgment which at first seems to muddy the waters insofar as the question of salvation is concerned. I say that because this parable seems to contradict the notion that a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ is the essential ingredient for salvation. In Romans 10:13 we read, "Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved," but in Matthew 7:21 we also hear Jesus saying, "Not everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved." The Parable of the Final Judgment transforms these stark contradictions into a mysterious paradox, leaving ample room for God's grace and freedom of action to disregard our finite preconceived notions about the right formula for salvation.

The king divides all the people who ever lived into two distinct groups—the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Keep in mind you and I will be somewhere in the mix, wandering about knowing our judgment is near and finding ourselves being anxious if not downright terrified, especially when we see many faces standing nearby we'd rather not have standing next to us because they don't necessarily fit our notions of being the kind of people who'd be welcomed into God's Kingdom.

Finally the king speaks. Looking at the sheep he declares, "Come you who are blessed by my father. Inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the beginning of the world." Then the king goes into a litany of what the people on his right did for him, how they fed and clothed him, extended him friendship and gave him something to drink, visited him when he was sick or in prison.

Now, pay careful attention to the sheep's reaction to the King's words. They were absolutely astounded! "When did we feed, clothe or visit you? When did we give you

something to eat or visit you? The King answers, "Whatsoever you did to the least of these my brothers and sisters, you also did it to me."

Apparently these folks were invited into the Kingdom not because they practiced the right religion and believed in the right doctrines or even because they were conscientious do-gooders. If you read the parable carefully, you realize those at the right hand weren't trying to earn their way into heaven by being good. The truth is they served the least of these without any expectation of reward or even knowing they were being watched. In fact they even said to the King they never realized they were serving him. You even get the sense many of them never even know this King up until that very moment.

Question: why were they invited into the kingdom while the goats on the left were sent away? Could it be because they were innocently and unintentionally participating in God's love and compassion for all people? If that's the case, just like Jesus of Nazareth, they couldn't ignore other people's suffering. Instead they took a risk and entered into their neighbors' suffering. Remember what I said, "The best part of you is where Christ lives within you." The love of Christ within them compelled those sheep to action while the goats who ignored Christ's presence within them chose to do nothing.

So, according to this parable salvation is determined by whether or not we knowingly or unknowingly claim Christ's love and then act on it no matter what your religion happens to be. Does that then mean biblical doctrines or teachings are unnecessary? No, not at all. They're still essential but not knowing them condemns you? Would a merciful and just God send people to hell for what they don't know or comprehend? At the same time, wouldn't people who know and accept these doctrines put their salvation at risk by ignoring the indwelling of God's presence and then ignore the suffering of God through the suffering of others?

You may still be wondering if I'm actually claiming one enters the Kingdom of Heaven simply by doing good works and by being a good person. I'm not. You can't earn your way into heaven. Salvation, according to the scriptures, isn't earned, instead it's a gift only God can offer. Even the nicest person in the world is still a sinner and all our good works put together aren't enough to save us. What I am suggesting is that when anyone accepts God's grace, which is offered to everyone, then we have a choice to either accept or reject it in whatever form it comes. Christians receive it one way other people receive it another way but no matter how it comes, it's from the same source, God through Christ.

What's really unique and beautiful about the Parable of the Last Judgment is that the sheep who served the least of these never recognized Jesus in the people they helped until the King came out and told them it was him all along. So it isn't knowing the right teachings about Christ, it's by allowing yourself to love and serve Christ through others. It's all by grace alone if only because Christ loved us first, whether we recognize him or not.

So, where is Christ in all this? At the center holding all things together. Think of a wagon wheel with all its spokes and the hub at the center holding everything together. The

Parable of the Final Judgment informs us someday, everyone will stand before the King. I'm glad Christ is doing all the judging instead of you, me or anyone else because Christ will judge with perfect mercy and love. Only those who glory in their rejection of God by their actions will have anything to fear.

As you leave here to go home I hope you'll seriously and prayerfully consider the ramifications of this parable, not just for the sake of your salvation, that would be missing the point, but especially for the sakes of the least of these you will come across every day. Because you know Christ, you have been given a great privilege, but because you know Christ, you are also given a great responsibility: to be your brother's and sister's keeper because anyone in need is your neighbor.

Christ gave himself for the least of these. So since you've been given generously, go and live generously for Christ and others. Remember what Christ has done for you and go and do likewise if only because Christ loved you first.