

We are used to stopping and starting. Endings and beginnings. A new school year and an old school year. A new calendar and an old one. Every year a glittering ball drops in Time Square in New York City, announcing the countdown to another new year.

All say they can't wait for this year to end and a new one to begin, and that is what Jesus was thinking about in the words we just heard from the Gospel. Today is Christ the King, New Year's Eve in the life of the Church. It is the last day of the church year. Our texts deal with the final countdown when the old creation will pass away, and eternity begins for all.

Every parent remembers that one of the first classroom worksheets children bring home from school is "what belongs and what doesn't." For instance, if there were pictures of a puppy, kitten, hamster, and a stick, they would circle the three that belong together. As we gather loose change to put in coin rollers, we separate pennies, nickels, dimes, and quarters so those that are the same are wrapped together. *Some things can be similar but different. Some can look identical in one way but not in another.* There are times when what doesn't belong must be separated.

Jesus' audience was familiar with sheep and goats, and so he talked about separating scraggly four-legged animals, that graze and are about the same size and shape. They understood. Sheep stay in a flock, while goats wander. Sheep have wool, goats have hair. Sheep graze low and goats reach high. Sheep are docile while goats are aggressive. *While they look similar, shepherds know how and why to keep them in separate flocks.*

In our context, people all look generally alike, but there are differences in speech, opinions, family background, interests, and among those who follow Jesus and those who wander in a different direction. One day Jesus will welcome his flock home, while those who have scattered in other directions will be left in the cold. This reality is one of pain for Jesus and should be for us as well. His goal is that all should be one and none should be lost, and we are called to share in that loving hope.

God as a severe judge seems contrary to his message of love. But a judge simply, on the basis of "evidence at hand," announces what is obviously, already true. A judge's verdict should never be a surprise, if the facts are in the open. A basic premise in a court of law is that *it will be facts rather than assumptions that will separate fiction from reality.*

When this life ends, Jesus will stand at the gate of heaven and say "welcome home!" to his faithful flock. To those who refuse to be part of the flock, who follow

different leaders he will sadly, but firmly say what is true: “you have followed a different shepherd and you must live with the emptiness that you have chosen. “

So how are you just like everyone else? And what makes you different? Where have you chosen to live your life? Who is part of your flock and who has a different reason for existence? While we want everyone to be nice to each other and pain to go away, God’s concern is more for all to be a part of his flock so that they will never be left behind.

*Our lives of faith are not “obligations” to earn a place in the flock, but “loving actions” that reveal to others the shape of faith, in a God who came to wash feet and conquer our death. We are called to look like a loving shepherd rather than a broken world.*

That is why Jesus said, “When you feed the hungry, you feed me.” Or “when you ignored a lonely soul, you ignored me.” When we separate ourselves from the rest of God’s children, we separate ourselves from God. And when we welcome each other, we welcome the God who creates and loves all.

Some will complain, when all is said and done, that “God isn’t being fair.” (For “fairness” has become the theology of our culture.) A better question is “Was it fair for Jesus to live; suffer; die with no guarantee of any response? There is nothing more unfair than grace. Nothing more unfair than God choosing to assume the life of a human and endure the death which God doesn’t deserve. Yet his love did that FIRST, before we were even born.

*Think about Jesus’ ministry as a living will. His ministry revealed the plan of his estate, in leaving gifts to his faithful “offspring,” insuring by the presence of his Spirit that we would have the means to do what He asks. That is what his teaching was about, so that we would understand how we are to live.*

Back to sheep and goats: There is another reason for their separation, as *Jesus gathers his sheep to transform them into shepherds!!!* We are called to learn from Jesus’ example and reach out with the same nurturing and sacrificial love so all will know the good news of Jesus’ saving love. Just as children are nurtured to become functioning adults, sheep are gathered into a flock so they learn from the Shepherd and are able to then feed and lead the flocks they are called to serve. That is what Jesus lifts up for us today as we consider hungry children, the neighbors whom we have not yet welcomed, homeless veterans, lonely men, and women whose spouses have died, children without parents, or any number of people who are in need of comfort, care, and love. “These are all my children!” Jesus proclaims, “and how you treat them (or not) shows how you treat me!”

The real question is much more than a simple question of “sheep or goat?” but whether we will respond to his feeding and leading by doing the same with those around us. For Jesus’ goal is that we will become shepherds, so that none will be

lost, and all will feel the same love we so easily can take for granted. Jesus is a loving shepherd king whose desire is for all to come home, stay safe, and live with him forever.

*Faith without action is not true faith but only words! A Christian who fails to serve is like gift left unopened.*

*The reality of the last judgment is simply an announcement of what is already true. The power of faith is not shown through memorized answers, but in DAILY, ACTIVE SERVANT LOVE!*

It is so difficult for us now, with masks and distancing, but hopefully we will learn from this distancing and what we miss so that never again will we allow others to feel what we feel now. We miss the hugs, the touches, the close personal contacts, which are what make us like our loving Shepherd. And that we must never forget. For this is who we are called to be. *Until the last day, whether it comes tomorrow or well into the future, we have a holy calling as a holy flock, and as loving shepherds.*

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