

Matthew 25:31-46 ³¹“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ ³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ ⁴⁰And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ ⁴¹Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴²for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ ⁴⁴Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ ⁴⁵Then 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.’ ⁴⁶And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

On All Saints Sunday, we remember, honor, and give thanks for the saints who have gone on before us, and allowed God’s light to shine through them into our lives, and who sit at the banquet table now, cheering us on, for their salvation is not made complete without us.

On Veterans Day, we remember, honor, and give thanks for those who have given sacrificially on our behalf, and on behalf of our values of freedom and liberty.

On Christ the King Day we remember, honor, and give thanks for the fact that Christ is King – not just a teacher and healer and savior. But He is also King. And that means there is a Kingdom.

We sometimes forget about that “Kingdom” thing, although I’m not sure why – it must be the preachers’ fault. For it’s certainly not the fault of scripture.

THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN (as Matthew calls it) or THE KINGDOM OF GOD (as the term used mostly by Mark and Luke) is the CENTERPIECE OF JESUS’ TEACHING.

The time will come when we all must take the admission test. From His very first public preaching, where Jesus said: The time is fulfilled; the Kingdom is at hand, through our scriptures of the past two weeks, and with today’s scripture on the final Sunday of the Christian year (we start the new year next week with the first Sunday of Advent) Jesus is teaching to the test – telling us what we each need to know in order to pass the test.

The underpinning of today’s sermon came in the midst of our class this past Monday. It was the last class in the study on Christianity and Islam. The topic was *“After All We Have Studied, Where Do We Go From Here? How Should We As Christians Choose to Get Along with Muslims?”*

At one point, I tried to articulate one of the possible options, namely: If both Christians and Muslims didn’t focus so much on the theological differences but focus on the underlying ethic of both religions: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength; and love your neighbor as yourself – then we could probably get along together pretty well.

And one of the class members said: But isn’t having the right belief what Christianity all about – believe and you shall be saved.

And I said: Well, perhaps, if you just study the apostle Paul, that’s true. But if we read just the Gospels, I think we will see that Jesus was never an advocate of theological orthodoxy as the basis of being saved. Jesus’ teaching and life were all about the Kingdom of Heaven, and

following the ethic of Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength; and love your neighbor as yourself.

After I left class, I began to wonder: Did I get that right? Is it true that the whole notion of “right believing” really is Paul, and not Jesus?

And so, although it’s been a busy week, I committed myself to read all four Gospels. And, after having done so, I am convinced that what I said in class that night was indeed correct.

If we read just Jesus in the Gospels, it’s NOT about “right belief” as the key to heaven. **Not at all, not at all.** It’s about doing the right stuff: loving the Lord your God without your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and your neighbor as yourself.

Jesus begins his ministry saying: **The time is fulfilled; the Kingdom is at hand.** Then He says that **Not everyone who says ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of Heaven.**

And then we read about **people who come to Jesus and ask them: What must I do to be saved? His answers to them are NEVER “believe the right thing.” Not once!**

Instead Jesus tells them (usually in a story) that they must

⌘ **Do God’s will**

⌘ **Follow the commandments: love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and your neighbor as yourself**

⌘ **(to the rich young man/ruler) sell all that you have and give to the poor**

⌘ **Show mercy**

⌘ **Pay attention (our lesson two weeks ago)**

⌘ **Use it or lose it (our lesson last week) and**

⌘ **Follow the five finger test (our lesson for today) YOU DID IT TO ME.**

Now, I grant you: **much of Jesus' teaching was about how much we are all loved by God. We are indeed beloved children of God, precious and beautiful to behold.** That IS scriptural.

But, **I would be remiss** if I didn't share with you what the Gospels say: **If you want to enter the Kingdom of Heaven/God, then you need to pass the test. It's pass/fail. And it's based on WHAT YOU DO.**

BELIEVING IS FINE, BUT IF YOUR BELIEF ISN'T SHOWN IN YOUR ACTIONS, IT'S NOT GOOD ENOUGH; IT DOESN'T COUNT.

✦ **Do God's will**

✦ **Follow the commandments: love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and your neighbor as yourself**

✦ **Show mercy**

✦ **Pay attention (our lesson two weeks ago)**

✦ **Use it or lose it (our lesson last week) and**

✦ **Follow the five finger test (our lesson for today) YOU DID IT TO ME.**

✦ **If you don't seek God's kingdom FIRST, you don't seek it at all. If there is anything in your life more important than God's Kingdom – ANYTHING – then you miss it.**

It's not always easy. But that's what it is.

Pat Stafford died suddenly this past week. For the past 25-30 years of her life, Saint Marks was her family, her home, the center of her life.

Pat was often a challenge for us. She had mental limitations. She had hygiene issues. She had a hard time understanding the conventions of normal, polite company.

But, by God, she was one of ours.

Pat Stafford is what today's Gospel lesson is all about. Jesus said, **Whether you are a sheep OR a goat DEPENDS ON how you dealt with the difficult people, how you dealt with Pat Stafford. That's it. That's the test.**

It wasn't always easy. But I saw people in this church act like SUPER SHEEP. People in this church went out of their way to help Pat, to show Pat love, to make Pat know that Saint Marks was indeed her home.

It wasn't always easy. And we didn't always get it right.

Anyone here talk to Pat and know if she had the right beliefs? Does anyone here think that it really has anything to do with where Pat is now?

No, she was – as Jesus said – one who comes into the Kingdom as a little child.

If we want to experience the Kingdom of Heaven, remember, my sisters and brothers, Jesus said: IT'S AT HAND.

It's not just what happens after you die. It begins now.

And **the foundation of what Jesus teaches is HOSPITALITY.**

Everyone is a beloved child of God, precious and beautiful to behold – in God's eyes. And **our job is to follow the FIVE FINGER TEST** – treat each one of them as though they were Jesus, Himself.

✦ Believe what you may. Interpret scripture as you wish. Quibble about right doctrines all you want.

✦ But, please – whatever you do: remember that all that RELIGIOUS STUFF won't make you pass the test.

✦ It's Pass/Fail. It's about WHAT YOU DO. It's about YOUR RELATIONSHIPS. Be like a little child. Be Hospitable to everyone.

✦ It's what the KING told us is necessary.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

