

Epworth Chapel on the Green
April 17, 2016
Fourth Sunday of Easter: From Lost Sheep to Christ's Flock
Rev. John Crow

Acts 13:15-33
Psalm 100
Revelation 9:7-19
John 10:22-30

"I like money, and I'd like to have some." Those were the words of a young man in a movie applying for a job. He faced the same challenge that most young people face when applying for their first job: the job they want requires experience, yet how can they gain any experience if no one will hire them? It's a kind of chicken or the egg conundrum.

Jesus' words in today's gospel reading reveal to us that being a follower of Christ has a similar challenge: "you don't believe me because you are not part of my flock," He said. But how can one be part of the flock, without first believing? The answer is of vital importance, because whether one is part of Christ's flock or not makes all the difference in the time of judgment, which we must all face.

Judgment is where I'd like to start. Today's reading from Revelation chapter nine gives a graphic depiction of judgment. If it didn't give you any sense of fear or awe, you must have been dozing. This is in stark contrast to our readings from the Psalms and Acts, both of which emphasize God's good works. Or is it? Is it

possible, the God who brought the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt and saved them time and again, is the same God who will destroy a third of mankind in His wrath? And if so, what hope is there for us, who have rejected Him repeatedly by following our own desires instead of His?

Of course, despite what some have foolishly postulated over the years, there is but one God. And He does not change over time; He both saves and judges. He does this out of necessity—His own necessity—not because He is somehow forced to do it. Judgment is justice, and justice is something all people long for (though admittedly, the justice we long for is skewed in our favor). People from all societies, both pagan and God-fearing, have longed for justice; it's part of who we are. In fact, I would argue it is a remnant of the Garden that is still within us. But this yearning for justice only leaves us unsatisfied. We live in a world rife with injustice. The wicked get ahead; the innocent are jailed; the lazy get promoted; the healthy die young. We could all go on and on about the injustice we have seen or personally suffered, and this even in America, where Judeo-Christian values are written into the very fabric of our society. Without judgment, injustice wins. And God cannot allow that to happen.

The world would be simpler if God followed the advice of most child psychologists. They tell us that when a child misbehaves, it is important that they

are corrected right away, and that if they need consequences, those consequences are in line with the severity of the misbehavior. God doesn't operate like that. Our misbehaviors may not be punished at all during our lifetime, or if they are, we may not recognize it as such because we can't see the causal relationship between our sin and its consequences. God's justice comes on a scale of severity and punctuality that are beyond our understanding because we are so finite.

Even though we know God is good, and his judgment is fair, I think we have just enough sense of our own failings that the thought of judgment fills us with dread. And that's even knowing that Jesus died for our sins; but we'll discuss that more in a minute. Few, if any, of us would be so bold as to cry with the psalmist, "Arise, O God, judge the Earth!" (Psalm 82:8). I think we're more likely to be like the disciples saying, "Arise, O God, and let me sit at your right hand, because I deserve it!"

The last thing I want to say about judgment is that it is unavoidable. Sure, the judgment that John describes at the end of time is horrific, and will only be dealt out to those who live at that time, but we all face judgment. In fact, the plagues that will destroy much of mankind and earth are not even the final judgment; they are only preliminary. The final judgment comes when we are face-to-face

with the Creator, and He either says, “Well done, my good and faithful servant,” or, “I do not know you.” As terrifying as the end times may be, it is only physical death that today’s reading in Revelation describes. Eternal death is what is truly to be feared.

So what hope is there for any of us, when all we have done becomes revealed? Our hope, of course, is in our risen Savior. If we are part of His flock, then it is He, the Good Shepherd, whom God will see when He sits in judgment of us. Apart from our Shepherd, we are doomed, so don’t let the thought come, even for an instant, that *I’m a decent person*, or that in any way *I deserve this*. You’ll hear thinking like that in popular culture, and it is entirely wrong; yet when an idea is that pervasive, it can be hard not to be affected by it.

As I said earlier, it is being part of His flock that makes all the difference when our time of judgment comes. As we pray in our prayer of confession, we are like lost sheep. We may be *like* lost sheep, but we are lost no more! Even though we fall into sin from time to time like lost sheep, we who are followers of Christ know the voice of our Shepherd, and He knows us. Even if we stray, He searches us out, because He knows there are many spiritual dangers out there, and we can’t make it on our own.

Moving on from judgment, the scene from John chapter ten that we read today, where the Jews are confronting Jesus is full of irony. The passage starts by saying that this took place during the Feast of Dedication. That feast was an eight-day celebration in remembrance of when Judas Maccabaeus removed the pagan statue that the Romans had placed in the temple, and rededicated the temple for sacrifices, back in 167 BC. The irony was that this Judas, a great military leader, was seen as a messianic figure. Clearly, he was not the Messiah, since his victory was short-lived, but the Jews were looking for someone very much like Judas Maccabaeus. So, here it was, at the time and place of celebrating a messianic figure, that the Jews confront the one who truly was the Messiah, to ask if He was the One, but in Christ's words, they, "do not believe." Their question is not even an honest one. "How long are you going to keep us in suspense?" could just as easily be translated, "How long are you going to provoke us?" We can tell this is true by their reaction to His answer, in the verse that follows immediately after today's reading, where they picked up stones to stone Him. Yet Jesus does not give up on them, pleading with them a few verses later that if they can't believe His words, believe His deeds. Last week we talked about the *Hound of Heaven*. Well, this is the perfect picture of that. Even when people

stand before Christ with hatred in their hearts, ready to strike Him down, He still tries to woo their souls.

If Jesus' claim to be one with the Father weren't enough for them, telling the Jews that they aren't part of His flock was almost as bad, that is, if you accept that He is the Messiah. *What do you mean, the Jews aren't part of God's flock?! We are His chosen people. Our Scripture tells us this time and time again. If we aren't part of His flock, no one is.* Jesus is starting to paint the picture of His Church—a universal body not limited to a particular ethnicity, nor subject to political powers. On the one hand, the Jewish people can no longer rely on their special role in God's plan, but on the other, they will be welcomed with open arms into the Church.

Back to my earlier question: *how can one be part of the flock, without first believing?* We're back to the chicken or the egg question of which comes first: belief or belonging? For those who are raised in the Church, our Anglican tradition tells us that one can belong before he or she is old enough to truly believe (or as I like to think of it, before he or she is old enough to lose their innate faith). That is why we baptize infants. By being raised in a community of believers, it is more likely that a child will recognize Christ's voice when He calls, and in the meantime, the community believes on the child's behalf.

Not everyone is so lucky, however. For those who are not raised in the Church, the Good Shepherd must seek them out in other ways. And He does. As the Hound of Heaven, Jesus never stops tracking us. There is no depth so low that He cannot reach us, and pull us up to Himself. I'm sure some of us here today can personally attest to this fact.

But whether one was raised in the Church or not, I think Madeleine L'Engle got it just right when she said, "Some things have to be believed to be seen."

Christianity only makes sense from the inside. It is a mysterious work of the Holy Spirit that allows the leap of faith into the unknown, which we all must make, and find ourselves caught in the arms of Christ.

The Hound of Heaven doesn't work alone, however. He has many who track in His name. Of course, I'm talking about you and I. And if there is one single lesson I think we all must take away from John's visions recorded in Revelation, it is this: We should feel a heavy burden for those who are headed toward eternal judgment outside the flock. Christ died to make it possible for us to be part of His flock. In light of the overwhelmingly awesome, unavoidable judgment ahead, how can we keep our faith to ourselves? If friends don't let friends drive drunk, then they certainly don't let friends die without having heard the saving testimony of the gospel message. And that doesn't mean we get to wait until

someone is dying to witness to them. Our lives need to be a witness every day, so that when an opportunity does arise to share our faith, or actions don't say otherwise.

I couldn't help but notice that the reaction of those outside the flock was the same in both today's gospel and in Revelation; both of which occur just after the verses we read today. Their reaction is that of pride and rebellion. They failed to recognize Christ's voice. We may face the same any time we step out in faith and witness to someone. It would be nice if Christ guaranteed us success. But we don't know when someone's heart is ready to hear the message. Nor do we know if at any given time, we are simply sowing what someone else will reap. All the more reason to be ready, and not to shy away when that moment comes.

I mentioned earlier that we should feel burdened for those who are facing judgment as lost sheep. I want to end with two more emotions—two feelings that should be stirred within us from understanding God's judgment. One is gratitude; gratitude that Christ died and rose again to free us from the burden of judgment which no one can stand alone. We should also feel gratitude for the knowledge that in the end, justice prevails. And second is anger; anger at sin and the destruction it causes in this life, and after it. Sin is making people deaf to Christ's voice. He is lovingly calling all His sheep to His stable, where there is

safety, and plenty to eat and drink, and rest. But sin makes many deaf to the call, or makes them think, *I don't need protection because there is no prowling lion.*

But we know better, not because we are smarter, but because we are part of Christ's flock, and we've got work to do.