
Spanning the Chasm on Judgment Day

A Sermon by the Rev. Thee Smith, Priest

Assoc.

In the name of God, our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend! Amen.

A friend of mine likes the following riddle. "There are two kinds of people," it begins; "those who divide the world into two kinds of people, and those who don't." Then he proceeds to unpack the riddle.

I wonder [he asks] . . . whether there really can be a group of people who don't divide. Just making the observation itself creates a division between two groups of people: (1) those who divide the world into two kinds of people and (2) those who don't. As soon as you say there's a group of folks who don't make such divisions, you've made just such a division!

Now right here I want to tack onto my friend's riddle a joke that I like to tell because it allows me to have a little fun with my own name. And I don't mean my first name!

Once upon a time all the people in the world were named "'Smith.' But one day the great majority of people did something so bad that they disappointed God and God had to punish them. And this was the punishment: all the *good* people got to keep the name, "'Smith' [smile], but the bad people had to get all the other names like "'Brown' and "'Jones' and "'Jackson,' etc. So that's why people have so many different names in the world today. And that's how you can tell who the really *special* people are""don't you know?

So there it is! End of joke. What do you think, huh? A little silly, right, even inane. But it does illustrate quite well my friend's point about dividing the world into two groups of people. So imagine how you would tell the same joke, but substituting your family name for mine:

Once upon a time all the people in the world were named, well, with your family name; fill-in the blank with whatever it is . . . But one day the great majority of people did something so bad that they disappointed God and God had to punish them. And this was the punishment: all the *good* people got to keep the name""again, fill-in the blank with your name. . . But the bad people had to get all the other names""and here, fill-in the blank with

whatever family name you don't like! So that's why people have so many different names in the world today. And that's how you can tell who the really *special* people are""don't you know?

Oh well, so much for humor. But that's actually what we all do in our different families and groups, isn't it? So the joke raises precisely the question that my friend asks following his riddle: "Can there ever be a group of folks who don't divide the world into two kinds of people?" he asks. And this is how I've heard him answer his own question:

If there ever can be [he speculates] I think it will be followers of Christ. I think it's what we're called to be. St. Paul, in several places, says what he says in Galatians (3:28): "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." . . . Yes, for St. Paul, being a disciple of Christ means living without distinctions between groups of people.

Why? Because usually in our divisions, one group is up and the other down; one group is in, the other out. We keep peace among the insiders by banding together against the outsiders. Jesus came to end all that by himself becoming an outsider. He let himself be declared a criminal and executed on a cross outside the city walls of Jerusalem. St. Paul even went so far as to put it this way: "For our sake he *made* him to be *sin* who knew no *sin*, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Cor. 5:21) You see, our most basic division of the world is between sinner and righteous. God let Jesus be declared sinner in order to show God's righteousness of not allowing such divisions between peoples in the first place. Yes, Jesus came to put a stop to our habit of dividing the world in two.

Now right here let me interrupt my friend's comments with another humorous illustration. But this one describes even more forcefully what he calls in the last sentence I just quoted, "our habit of dividing the world in two." This "habit" is universal, and it has been labeled with other terms like "'dualism' (Richard Rohr) and "'polarization' and "'binary opposition.'" Notice our human""all too human compulsion to make endless pairs of polarized opposites in the following example.

Once I saw this guy on a bridge about to jump [the story goes]. I said, "Don't do it!" He said, "Nobody loves me." I said, "God loves you. Do you believe in God?"

He said, "Yes." I said, "Are you a Christian or a Jew?" He said, "A Christian." I said, "Me, too! Protestant or Catholic?" He said, "Protestant." I said, "Me, too! What franchise?" He said, "Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?" He said, "Northern Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?"

He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern

Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region, or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern Region?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region." I said, "Me, too!"

Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879, or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912." I said, "Die, heretic!" And I pushed him over. [Elmo Philips, "The Best God Joke Ever; and Its mine;" The Guardian; Sept. 28, 2005; www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2005/sep/29/comedy.religion]

Well, there it is. By the way, that joke from the 1980s has been voted the funniest religious joke of all time. And I think it's pretty clear why. It's because it features one of the most universal dynamics in human relationships. But now, consider my friends concluding reflections on this dynamic as it plays-out in today's gospel scene; the scene of Judgment Day.

Today's gospel gives another example. Those who are declared righteous by the Son of Man in the end are those who didn't play the usual games of dividing the world between those up and those down. The hungry and thirsty, the stranger and poorly dressed, the sick and in prison, these are those who generally count in the down-an-out group. Yet God's righteous are surprised to hear that that's exactly where Christ was encountered in their lives. When they showed mercy to the least of this world, they showed mercy to Christ, who came to break down those dividing walls.

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[In Jesus' prophecy] There will no longer be two groups, the up-and-ins and the down-and-outs. In Christ Jesus we will all be one, all be made brothers and sisters.

[Of course] There is one problem with this parable, though. The Son of Man does his own division between folks. The king separates between the sheep and the goats, those who find eternal life and those who are given eternal fire. Is this any better than our human forms of righteous vs. sinner? Why would Christ have to die on the cross as a sinner only to end up with an eternal form of dividing between sinner and righteous?

Let's imagine this parable a bit differently. For, even if Jesus tells it as the end of the story, he is telling it at a moment when his end of the story on the cross hasn't come yet. They can't understand what that will mean yet. So let's imagine two things about this story. First, that the cross has now happened for us listeners. How does that change things?

Now here, we are to imagine a supernatural scene where the sheep and the goats are separated on opposite sides of a great chasm.

. . . But the sheep just stand there, looking across to the other side, their eyes wide not with rejoicing or satisfaction, and surely not with gloating, but with astonishment and the kind of fear the compassionate have when they see others in danger. For over there, on the other side, among the goats, are so many of those for whom they have cared all this while, and now what will become of those others? Are they to be separated forever? Who will care for them now?

The sheep know about many kinds of starvation, illness, and imprisonment. They have fed the hungry with bread . . . and given water to the thirsty. They have visited those with pneumonia, cancer and AIDS. They have visited in penitentiaries. But they have ministered to others in need as well . . . provided sustenance . . . [to fill] the very cravings that drove the goats to selfishness and seemingly unconcerned arrogance. The sheep have welcomed and befriended [those] . . . so estranged they'd become strangers even to themselves. And the sheep kept visiting the cells of those imprisoned in hatred, the goats who hated everyone, and themselves most of all . . .

The sheep had given so much of themselves to those others. How could someone now separate them forever from those others? How could the Son of Man in this moment call them "blessed?" How could they rejoice over their inheritance as they looked across the chasm, toward those who remained lost, sick, naked, and imprisoned in their own pitiful selfishness? How could they ever again sing a glad song?

As we eavesdrop, we hear them weeping. Then they address the Son of Man . . . "Son of Man . . ."

we cannot in this moment do nothing. We must go across to them," the sheep insist. "You must let us go to them."

The son of man studies them and calmly says, "You cannot go across. It is too late. For you there is no more time." For a moment there is stillness.

"Then you must go," declare the sheep. "Son of Man, you must remember . . . the moment when the soldiers pinned you to the cross, pounded in the nails, and you were condemned. You must remember the thirst out of which you cried, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' Remember the torture of abandonment! You must go to them, Son of Man!"

A deep and heavy silence comes over the judgment scene. The Son of Man says nothing. He looks at the sheep, his own eyes now wide, looking like theirs. Then he turns, and he steps across. How could he not heed their voices? He had taught them to talk like that. They were using his own best

lines on him. He would go. He could not judge from vengeance. He would have to go -- to Bethlehem, to Calvary, to Antioch, to Rome, to Kansas City, to Calcutta, yes, even to hell. He would spend eternity, if it took that, like a shepherd forever in search of lost sheep, working restlessly to slake the final thirst and break down the last prison. Some might hide from him forever, but his heart told him, and the look in the eyes of those sheep told him, he could never give up. If he was to be king, he must be a shepherd king, a tireless, searching king, a king with holes in his hands and crowned forever with thorns, scouring endlessly the depths of hell, looking, calling, and . . .

. . . hoping one day to sit at the right hand of God, at table with everyone, every last one, to eat and drink of the supper which will have no end . . . [where] Both halves of the human race would have a future [the righteous, and the former but now redeemed unrighteous]. [Frederick Niedner, from *Proclaiming a Cruciform Eschaton*, a small booklet published for the 1998 Institute of Liturgical Studies at Valparaiso University, pages 5-8. Accessed Nov. 19, 2011 at: http://girardianlectionary.net/res/niedner_matt25.htm]

Now here, regardless of whether or not we can agree about how to interpret Jesus' prophecy about Judgment Day, we *can* find our unity in the prayer appointed for this Sunday. It's the Collect found at the top of page 185 of the Book of Common Prayer. Please find a prayerbook there in the pew rack in front of you, and pray with me the Collect appointed for this last Sunday in the church season of Pentecost, Christ the King Sunday. Please join me now in praying the Collect for today.

Almighty and everlasting God, whose will it is to restore all things in your well-beloved Son, the King of kings and Lord of lords: Mercifully grant that the peoples of the earth, divided and enslaved by sin, may be freed and brought together under his most gracious rule; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

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