

Tomorrow every kid in Mecklenburg County will be back at school.

Yes – the traffic will be a little more congested.

Yes – you should watch out for those 25 mph school zones.

But it marks a definite shift from the doldrums of late summer to the new routine that comes with fall.

I find the last couple of weeks of the summer before school starts to be...well...interminable. You know how a yellow jacket starts to behave near the end of their life-cycle as the summer dies out and the weather begins to finally cool down – how their reaction time is delayed and they just slow down almost as in a stupor? That’s kind of what my house is like in late summer...camps are over, vacations are through, too much screen time, the creative juices are squeezed. We. Just. Kind. Of. Exist. For us – the start of a fall routine is like a deep breath of fresh air to parched lungs.

Knowing that summer is effectively over when kids go back to school, a couple of years ago our church aligned our “Kick Off Sunday” to this last weekend in August instead of after Labor Day. We started today with a fellowship breakfast taking a look at plans for the next few months. This week, Wednesday nights start back with children’s choirs. Youth Group has already launched with a fun day at the lake last weekend. As my middle schoolers would say, “we are cooking.” (I’m going to get made fun of for that at home later.)

The mission of our church is to “reflect the love of Christ from the center of our city.” One of the things you will hear – starting today, and into next year – where it will shape our programming – is a phrase that expounds upon that mission statement. Think of it as a shorthand way of how to embody what it is that our church is about: we want all members – and visitors – alike to “know and show the love of Christ.” That’s what we hope happens as a result of being connected to our church. We want people to know and show the love of Christ – both on our campus, and – most importantly – in the world where God calls to church to go.

I’m doing that thing again where I almost preach a mini-sermon before I even get to the Scripture – but bear with me. Because there’s one more thing I want to say about routines.

Here is what I hope. I hope church for you can be more than a routine. I know today represents the start of a new cadence – we’ve got some programming that is starting back up and that means you might be around here a little more regularly because you or your kids are involved in those programs. That’s great.

But what I hope you know – and feel – is that church is a little different than any other activity you might participate in or group of which you might be a part. Because what happens here – and I mean this – what happens here isn’t that you come and **do** something, or *consume* something, or enjoy something. No, what happens here is that you are reminded that **you are something**: you are the church – the living, breathing ambassadors of Jesus for the world that Christ came to save.

We're going to hear our Scripture in a moment, but first join me in prayer and then let us center ourselves through the music of our choir. Pray with me:

From the busyness of our days, O Lord, we ask that you would slow us down...allow us to breathe...and open our ears, hearts, and minds by your Spirit so that we can listen to your voice through this holy word in Scripture. We ask it in Jesus's name. Amen.

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Our Scripture today is from near the end of Matthew's gospel. It is familiar story. Listen carefully with me as I read from the 25th chapter, verses 31-46:

'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.

All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

Then 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; for 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, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then 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? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?"

And 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."

Then 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; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I 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." Then 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?"

Then 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." And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'

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I was a student for way too many years before I learned what might have been the most important lesson of all: it isn't about the test.

I literally think I may have been in graduate school – that's like the 17th, 18th, and 19th grade – when a lightbulb went off in my brain and I considered the idea that, maybe, learning in and of itself is useful and fun...and the mechanisms by which teachers measure learning isn't really the main point.

Of course, if you are a student below 17th grade, I get why you might not understand this yet. What was already true for me 30 years ago is even more true for you: many of your teachers are taught to teach to a test (be it EOG, ERB, AP, IB, ACT, or SAT). I can imagine you equate school and learning with pressure and test scores and performance...which isn't your fault at all...that's the message you've received from the adults who surround you.

But what I want to tell you – believe it now or later – is that learning really isn't about that...learning is about discovery and possibility and finding ways to change and to improve. It's so much more dynamic and beautiful than some silly numeric grade on an assessment tool.

One way to interpret the story I just read that Jesus told about the sheep and the goats is to look at it like a test. At first glance, it's easy to see why you would do that, right? It just seems like Jesus lays it out. Like, here's the deal – when it comes time for The King to decide who gets to be on his right side and who will go his left (sorry – left-handers...in this case, the left is definitely NOT the side you want to be on...) – when it comes time to make that final determination the test is whether or not you served the “least of these” without hoping for a reward. In the story, that's what makes a sheep a sheep.

I've got some more to say about how we may or may not interpret what Jesus is saying here – but before that, I want to pose an honest question: do we really think that a life of faith is about passing a test? Is that the point? Are we fashioned in the image of God, born into this big, beautiful, complicated world, adopted into a family of faith with stories that assure us of God's covenant promises that go all the way back to the beginning of when human kind appeared on the scene, are we given gifts and talents to figure out how to best use – all so, at the end of it, we are fit to stand for a final exam before a king sitting on a throne? Is that what this is all about?

I think a lot of people think so. I think a lot of churches send that message. I think a lot of times we take this gift of faith and render it into a study guide that will help us pass the final exam that we assume awaits us at the end of our lives.

Not only do I not think that is a large enough view of faith – I worry that it cheapens it. It turns the gift of faith into a strategy for self-improvement or achievement. It puts God in the place of meeting our ends and desires – instead of us in the place of serving God’s desires. To put it simply, if the goal of faith is about us passing a test – then maybe we have made faith about us.

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Warning: I’m about to geek out on some Bible study stuff.

Instead of reading today’s Scripture as it described an end-of-life test, another option is to see this story like a lot of other stories that Jesus tells – as a parable. Like one about the ten bridesmaids, or a landowner who gave his servants talents – both of which immediately precede the story of the sheep and the goats.

When Jesus tells parables, he tries – as one biblical scholar says – to “tease our minds into active thought.” Jesus doesn’t tell parables to make things clearer. He tells parables to make us think. That is – to make us think about the nature and God and God’s kingdom.

The other thing about the parables is that Jesus typically tells them in response to something or someone. In this case, after having arrived to Jerusalem and engaged in a conflict with the religious leaders and the Pharisees...with the cross on the near horizon...Jesus is addressing those who are concerned with drawing and keeping boundaries: clean and unclean, righteous and unrighteous, sacred and profane. **Jesus addresses those whose livelihood is predicated upon sorting people out – one from another – by telling a story about the Son of Man who sorts people out.**

And here’s the thing about this story that Jesus tells...it leaves us confused.

Consider what makes a sheep a sheep in this story: the sheep are those who act to serve the least of these without knowledge of any reward.

The goats’ question – where did we see you? – suggests that they *would* have practiced compassion toward the least of these *had they known* that in doing so they would be pleasing the King who sits on the judgment seat.

The point seems to be that the practice of compassion toward those who are vulnerable is not a means to an end. Sheep are not sheep simply because they are compassionate. They are sheep because they demonstrate compassion without regard to a reward.

And here’s what will really get you thinking about this parable. For anyone who hears this parable about judgment – once we get the idea into our heads that there will be a great sorting out – it is now impossible for that **not** to inform our actions.

Do you see that??? It’s tricky, right?

Once you hear this parable, the naiveté is gone.

When we hear this parable, we cannot forget about the reward.

Which leaves us uncertain about where we stand in the King’s eyes.

Perhaps, as my seminary professor Stan Saunders said, perhaps one reason why Jesus tells this parable in such a way as to leave us unsettled about where we fit in is because we spend too much of our time and energy worrying about where we fit in.

“Ultimately,” Stan writes, “the parable subverts all of our attempts to render the world into categories of good and bad, righteous and unrighteous, weak and powerful.”¹

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So, if faith is not about a test...

And if – in this story – Jesus is actually trying to help us not fret so much about where we will fit in, and about who is in and who is out...

Then what is the point?

To know the love of Christ

To show the love of Christ

That, I think, is the point.

I think that what God wants, more than anything...and what God has tried to show us again, and again, and again over the generations of those who are in our family of faith, most clearly in the person of Jesus – is that God is committed to loving us fully...and tirelessly...and relentlessly...and even-in-spite-of the ways we fail.

And – I think that when we consider what it means that Christ would love us completely – imperfections, broken-places and all – when we really digest what it means to be loved that fully – then we can’t help but love others the same way...most especially those who tend to be forgotten, or mistreated, or left-behind...those whom Jesus called “the least of these.”

¹ Saunders, Stan, *Preaching the Gospel of Matthew: Proclaiming God’s Presence*, p. 261.

“Know and Show”
Rev. Pen Peery
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We love and serve and give ourselves to those who have the least – not to earn favor, or to ease our conscience, or to build our resume for being a “Good Person” – but because we already know something that the power of love and care that comes as a form of grace. It’s what people who are loved by Christ do.

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In our church, it’s the start of a new program year.

We’re entering into the rhythm of the fall.

And what I hope you will find are opportunities to both know that you are loved by Christ and to show the love of Christ.

Take a class. Find a Bible study. Come to youth group. Join a circle. Join a choir.

Pick up a hammer at Habitat. Tutor a kid in reading or math. Come to Crisis Assistance the second Saturday of the month. Sign up for Room in the Inn in a couple of months.

And when you do those things, please remember that the goal is not to finish the class, or complete the project, or get a gold star for your participation.

The goal is to grow. To discover. To appreciate. To deepen our faith. To better understand our neighbors. To change.

Not for our own sake – but for the sake of all.

That is what it means to be the church.

And when we are on that kind of journey together, just imagine what God can do...

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