Sermon
26th Sunday After Pentecost
Light Lutheran Church – Bethel & Kapunda
November 22nd, 2026

Matt 25:31-46 – "Sheep & Goats... What's the Difference?"

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Have you ever tried to tell the difference between a sheep and a goat?

For those who grew up around farms, it probably isn't too difficult. You know what you're looking for. Sheep have woolly coats, goats have hair. Sheep tend to flock together, while goats can be rather independent and curious creatures. Yet, from a distance, particularly when they're young, they can look remarkably similar.

Getting them mixed up could cause a few problems for a farmer. That's why farmers know the importance of sorting their animals.

In today's Gospel, Jesus paints a picture of just such a scene. A shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. The sheep go to his right, the goats to his left. Jesus describes the final judgement. He shows us what happens when he returns in glory, sits upon his throne and gathers all the nations before him. There will be a separation. There will be no middle ground. So, what's the difference between the sheep and the goats?

Firstly, the difference isn't always obvious to us.

Jesus isn't telling an ordinary parable here, nor is he offering an allegory where every detail represents something else. He's describing the reality of the final judgement through images his listeners would understand. A shepherd. Sheep. Goats. A farmer sorting his animals.

In the Middle East, sheep and goats often grazed together. They could look quite similar, particularly from a distance. An untrained eye

might struggle to tell them apart. Yet an experienced shepherd knew exactly what he was looking at. The shepherd knew his animals.

That image tells us something important about God. We might look at one another and make all sorts of judgements. We might decide who looks religious, who seems respectable, who appears to have their life together and who doesn't. We might even look around our own congregations and think we know who the strong Christians are.

Yet God sees much deeper than appearances. He knows our hearts. He knows our faith, our doubts, our failures and our need for his grace. The difference between the sheep and the goats isn't simply something we can measure by looking at someone from the outside.

Secondly, Jesus tells us what distinguishes the sheep from the goats.

Listen again to what the King says to those on his right:

"I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in."

The sheep respond to people in need. They feed the hungry, welcome strangers, clothe the poorly dressed, care for the sick and visit those in prison. The goats don't.

What's particularly interesting is that neither group seems to recognise what they've done or failed to do. The sheep ask, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you?"

The goats ask a similar question: "Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?"

Both groups seem surprised. The difference isn't that one group has kept a careful record of its good deeds while the other hasn't. The difference lies in their relationship with the King.

The sheep belong to him. Their lives reflect his love. They respond to people in need because Christ has already shown them his love and mercy. This is important for us to understand.

Jesus isn't teaching salvation by good works. We don't earn our place in God's kingdom by feeding the hungry, visiting the sick or helping the disadvantaged.

We receive salvation through faith in Jesus Christ alone. He has done everything necessary to reconcile us to God. Through his death and resurrection, he has forgiven our sins and given us eternal life.

Our good works don't purchase that gift. They flow from it. They're the fruit of repentance and faith. They're the evidence of a life connected to Christ. Luther understood this well. We are saved by faith alone, but faith never remains alone. It becomes active in love.

Thirdly, Jesus makes a rather confronting statement.

"Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."

Think about that for a moment. Jesus identifies himself with those who suffer. When we respond to someone who is hungry, lonely, vulnerable, sick or forgotten, we're responding to Christ himself.

When we turn away, we turn away from him. That challenges us, doesn't it?

We live in a country where most of us have food in the fridge, a roof over our heads and more material comforts than many people throughout history could ever have imagined. We've enjoyed relative peace and prosperity in the Western world for generations. Yet something strange has happened along the way. Our comfortable lives can make us forget just how much we need God.

Australian culture increasingly treats the Gospel as something optional. Something for people who need a crutch. Something that might be useful when you're young or when life gets difficult but otherwise can wait. We can become comfortable with our possessions, our routines and our own little corner of the world and that can happen in church as well.

We're blessed with five preaching points across Light Lutheran. Each has its own history, traditions, friendships and familiar ways of doing things. There's a great deal of love and commitment in each community.

Yet it's easy to become comfortable in our own spaces. We can concentrate on looking after our own congregation and forget that Christ calls us to look beyond ourselves.

The good news is that we're seeing some new families joining us across our congregations. That's encouraging. They're a reminder that God continues to bring people into our midst. They're also a reminder that our mission hasn't finished. We're not simply here to maintain our buildings, preserve our traditions or keep our little corner of the church ticking along. We're here to share Christ.

Finally, there's something even more important in this Gospel.

Jesus doesn't leave us wondering whether we belong to him. The King says to the sheep:

"Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world."

Did you hear that? The kingdom was prepared for them before they had done a single good work. Their inheritance wasn't something they earned. It was God's gift. That's the Gospel!

Through baptism, God has called us his own. Through faith in Jesus, he has adopted us into his family. We're members of Christ's body,

the church. We belong to him, not because we've lived perfect lives, but because Jesus lived, died and rose again for us.

Our assurance doesn't rest on how many people we've helped, how many church services we've attended or how well we've managed our Christian lives. Our assurance rests on Jesus.

He's the Good Shepherd who knows his sheep. He's the King who gives us an inheritance. He's the Saviour who laid down his life for us. The final judgement is real. Jesus makes that absolutely clear. There are ultimately only two groups: those who belong to him and those who reject him. Those who receive eternal life and those who face eternal punishment.

That's a serious warning, but it's not a reason for believers to live in fear and uncertainty. Rather, it's a reason to keep trusting Jesus and holding firmly to his promises.

While we wait for his return, he calls us to live as his people. To recognise those in need. To welcome the stranger. To care for the vulnerable. To forgive one another. To share the love and reconciliation we've received through him.

We don't do these things to become sheep. We do them because Christ has made us his own. Perhaps that's the real difference between the sheep and the goats. One group lives turned towards the King, while the other lives without regard for him.

So, what's the difference?

It's not the size of our bank accounts, the age of our congregation, the number of people in our pews or how well we manage our church affairs. It's Christ.

He has claimed us, forgiven us and made us his own. He now calls us to share his love with the people around us, especially those who need it most.

As we finish another church year and look towards the coming of our King, let's not become complacent or turn inwards. Let's keep our eyes on Jesus, trust his promises and keep sharing his love across all five of our preaching points and beyond. For the Good Shepherd knows his sheep. He has laid down his life for them, and he will bring them safely home.

Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.

Amen.