

Sermon: *To Each Their Own Ability*  
The Rev. David J. Marshall, All Angels 11.26.23

Welcome to Christ the King Sunday. This is the last Sunday of the Church year. Next Sunday is the first Sunday of Advent which means there are four Sundays before Christmas!

The last lesson of this church year, which featured the Gospel of Matthew, ends with this hard to forget story about the sheep and goats. The King, seated on the throne, will gather all the people, metaphorically shown as either sheep or goats, and separates them. The sheep he welcomes into his glorious Kingdom (which we read as heaven) and the goats are sent away to a place with weeping and gnashing of teeth (which we read as hell). The sheep are surprised because the King, who welcomed them into his Kingdom, said that *when I was hungry you fed me, thirsty you have me a drink, without clothing and you gave me clothes, in prison and sick and you visited me*. More surprised, the sheep asked: when did we see you like that?! The King replied: *when you did it to the least of the people of my family, you did it to me*.

Then the goats... they didn't do that so they were sent away.

Back in Jesus' day, it can be said that this was good news. In our day and time, however, and especially, for some reason, in the Episcopal Church, many feel guilty or ashamed when we hear this lesson. It does not sound like good news to us. Why you might ask? Because, from my experience, people in the Episcopal Church – myself included – often reflect on when they were goats and not sheep. For our reading of this passage today, I'd like to take away the guilty feeling from it and hopefully show you something different; something you may not have considered, or heard, before.

This passage follows directly after the parable of the servant who received five talents, the servant who received two, and the servant who did nothing but bury the one talent that he had received. The start of that parable is this: "To each according to his ability." That parable flows directly into today's passage – the king separated people like sheep and goats. I think the phrase, to each according to his or her own ability, flows into reflecting on the sheep, who cared for others. To each according to their own ability. Please keep that phrase in mind when I share this story with you.

I have had the opportunity and honor to mentor four people through the ordination process – three deacons and one priest. The priest was a Roman Catholic priest who was received into the Episcopal Church. Interestingly enough, he became the rector of the church that I left to come here. The three deacons – Phil, Tom and David – are all amazing people. Deacons are called to serve people in need. They visit the sick, they manage all sorts of feeding programs, they run shelters and help people get clothing and even vocational training. Deacons are amazing people. Deacon Tom is a part of a large prison ministry. Deacon David works within the Betty Ford Clinic in Palm Springs and helps people break out of the prison of their own addictions. And then there is Phil.

He returned from Vietnam in 1971 and got a job with Bell South digging ditches. He said digging ditches in San Diego was a lot better than fighting in the jungle and he was pleased to have the job. As time went on, he was recognized for his leadership abilities and his ethics. He moved up the corporate ladder so that eventually he was working for AT&T and had people with advanced degrees reporting to him. ... he never went to college. Another thing about Phil is that when he was out in the field, digging ditches or whatever else it was that he was working on, he'd pack a spare lunch. He always found people out in the field (usually it was literally a field) who needed food. When he retired, he knew God was pulling him into diaconal ministry. His challenge was the academic side of ordination preparation. But, thanks be to God, he got through it.

After ordination, God called Phil to go into a valley that runs through San Diego. When he arrived he found a little trail and started walking into this dry river valley. Because of his Vietnam experience, he recognized quickly that there were makeshift campsites dotted all around. Many of the people living there were once in the military. Phil stopped and found a place to sit down and wait. He had learned you can't just rush into a homeless encampment and expect people to talk or open up to you. After a couple days of sitting in the same spot, people started coming forward and talked to him. He had some amazing conversations about God and the military and homelessness and especially for the love they had for one another and their family members. This became his congregation.

The Holiday Bowl was coming to town and someone made the decision that the valley had to be cleared before the national media attention showed up. Phil was there, quite by happenstance, when the police arrived, with a long line of modern-day paddy wagons and started to round up the people in the valley. Phil stood in line with the rest of the people. Eventually they came to him and asked for identification. It was winter, and a little chilly, so he had a parka on zipped all the way up to his chin. He unzipped it to get his wallet out and the officer saw his clerical collar. The officer said, "Father, you don't need to be in this line. You can go home." Phil replied: First, I'm not a priest, I am a Deacon, I work for a living; secondly, I am home." The officer said, yeah, but your address here is near Balboa Park. He replied: Yes, that's my house, but, this is where I am doing ministry and these are my people. The officer again said, "Go home." Phil refused and said that he is going to go where his people are going. The discussion got a little heated and the folks that he ministers to stepped in, gently removed Phil from the situation.

A little while later, there was a growing church about eight miles east of San Diego. They were growing but wanted help in making an Outreach program. The bishop sent Phil there. He drove up and noticed that the church was on a traffic circle with three other churches and a park in the middle. In the park, he noticed about eight homeless people. He parked the car and instead of walking to the church, he walked to them. He sat down, introduced himself, and started listening. Eventually the 10 am bells started ringing and one of the men asked if he needed to go. He said he'd see them next week.

The following week, there were ten. And then fifteen. And then more and more. They were showing up to have Phil pray for them and give them the good news. Eventually, someone from the church brought out the coffee hour snacks and everyone ate in the park. This moved to a full-on lunch feeding program that cared for about 80 people every Sunday. While this is happening, the city passed an ordinance that stated there will be no feeding of people in any of the city parks (directed, it is believed, at this church and their program). The next Sunday, after being warned, they did their normal thing. Eighty-five people showed up for lunch, fifty people from the church came out to serve them, and a representative from the Mayor's office, some police also showed up, and so did members of the media. Phil invited them all to eat. He was told that it is illegal to do that. He paused and looked across the park. One of the other churches had their Sunday School groups eating in the park. Phil pointed and said, "Is that illegal too?" The response: no, those are members of that church. Phil smiled, spread out his arms and said, "These are members of this congregation too."

When did we see you hungry, or thirsty, or in need of a visit?

Phil is superman in a clergy shirt. To each to their own ability. This is what God has called him to do. I am proud of him but I cannot or should not compare myself to him. To each to their own ability.

Here's something to think about. There are all sorts of verbs in today's lesson. Wouldn't you know it, the verbs – to give – are all in the aorist tense. That is a tense we do not have in English. It means something that has happened in the past, is still happening today, and will happen in the future. When the King said, "You gave me something to eat," it could be translated into English this way: the food you gave me then, it has an impact on me now and will have one in the future. In other words, it's not a past tense – you gave – and that's where it ended. No, when you give, when you help someone, the King sees it as an act in the past that is still happening today and will happen.

When have you helped someone in the past? When have you been helped in the past? Yeah, it sticks with you and makes you more open to help others. Phil had said of the people in the park and in the valley, they are some of the most generous people he's ever met. They know what it is like to receive and they want to give back.

To each their own ability.

When you support the Church, you support the ability for us to raise up people like Phil. You make it so that from generation to generation the Church keeps going. Like the aorist tense, what you have given, is helping now and will help in the future.

Another way to look at it – if you've helped someone in the past. If you've given a coat to someone who needed it. If you've visited someone who was sick and made their day. These are

all things the King sees and recognizes and identifies with. Maybe you are not in a position to do that now. That's okay, because when you have given, it is now and will be.

To each their own ability. That applies to their strength and their time and their place. Rejoice in what you have given; know that it is still happening today, and, with God's help, it will be so in the future.

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