Psalm 100 and Matthew 25:31-46

“It isn’t fair”

 One of my most vivid memories as a teenager was the summer when I turned 17. The day after I got my license we went on a road trip from Atlantic City to Tegucigalpa, Honduras. My brother worked at a development organization and we went down to help for a couple of months. One day we drove to a village called La Esperanza. For the first time in my life I saw firsthand children with distended stomach’s, poverty that I had only seen on TV. We hiked through a path for an hour and a half and when we arrived the villagers greeted us with a steaming cup of freshly steamed goat milk.

 They split us up and I was tasked with gathering the sugar cane in the fields. I went out along with a fairly attractive 15 year old of the village. I picked up 10 of the canes thinking that I would impress her and wanting to show off my adolescent strength. She one by one reached down and put 15 of them on her head and walked off. Besides being humiliated, and dropping my canes as I went, I was shocked to hear her humming and singing to herself: Gracias a Dios. Thanks be to God.

 It started to rain and they asked me to go work with her father to replaces some of the tiles on the roof, which I happily did. Her father was dressed in rags and I worked away in the rain while he coughed constantly with what had to be symptoms of TB. But in spite of the misery of the situation I heard him humming in between the coughs, and singing that same song, Gracias a Dios.

 I didn’t know Jesus personally then, but what I realized summer which set the stage for my later conversion, was that I wanted Thanksgiving, which later became giving thanks to God, to be my way of life, even in the midst of pain, tragedy, and despair. This Sunday before Thanksgiving is also liturgically the last Sunday of the year which is called Christ the King Sunday.

 So while our first Scripture is probably the most traditional Thanksgiving Psalm we know, our second Scripture is another parable, in fact it comes immediately following what we read last Sunday, in which Jesus Christ is portrayed as the King. Let’s read this second Scripture.

 **READ**

 This past week I went with the Young Adult Sunday School class and served at the Water Street Mission. I guess according to this parable I should be covered, shouldn’t I? One of my best friends in college after basketball practice in a full locker room asked me: Bob, since I’m Jewish can I go to heaven? What does this parable tell us? Water Street, I’m covered. Not have any faith in Jesus Christ, no problem, just do the right thing.

 At first glance this parable seems to reflect the way in which the world thinks about fairness, about justice. Think about it. We are used to a system of incentives at work and with relationships that deal with a carrot and stick approach. If you are good and do what you are told then you get a reward. Conversely if you are unproductive and disobey then you get punishment. It is a simple system and one that we assume the world runs on.

 But guess what? God does not work according to that system, and we should all say, praise God. God does not reward and punish based upon whether we have been good or bad. IN life the good people do not have all things and bad people have nothing, but rather as Jesus states in Matthew 5:45, God makes his sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

 God’s grace is the great equalizer because it puts everyone on an even playing field. We have all sinned an fallen short of the glory of God. There is no hierarchy of who sinned less or who sinned more. We are all equal where sin is concerned. Not a single one of us should every try to presuppose that we have an answer and are able to dictate who is a sheep and who is a goat.

 Do you remember what Satan asks God in Job? Do you really think anyone would serve God for nothing? Since when has it been enough for anyone just to know that they are serving their creator and that in this life there is no justifiable reward. In the parable both the righteous and the unrighteous are unsure of their status before God. When did we see you…I would guess that the goat would have served a few more meals at Water Street if he thought it would have made a difference. The sheep, well, it was just part of his nature to reach out to other people in the spirit of Thanksgiving.

 You know what is interesting in this parable is that in Palestine it was customary to have mixed flocks. In the evening the shepherds separates them because the goats need to go inside to keep warm and the sheep prefer open air at night. Sheep tend to be more valuable and they are also more robust and sturdy and don’t need to be pampered at night. Fortunately Psalm 100 tells us that we are the sheep of his pasture, we are his people. But that doesn’t mean that our life is going to be easy. It should always be in our nature, however, to live out of thanksgiving.

 The Romans on their idols used to engrave the saying “do ut des”. Who knows what that means? I give in order that you, meaning the idol, may give. How much of our faith in our life is built around this very same idea that if we serve God , then in some way God should serve me. Lord, before I commit, what is in it for me? But our Scripture tells us that God does not give according to what we deserve but according to his generosity and compassion.

 We should all be breathing a sigh of relief right now because if God did give according to what we deserved we would all be in trouble. The reality of the fact is that we are all goats and none of us can be in a position to say that our neighbor is not going to be in heaven with us. Now, I know that today of all days when we are going to be celebrating soon our 50+ year members, it is tempting to say that at some level we deserve to have a place with our Father. I come from generations of pastors and missionaries so doesn’t my family, at least my kids, can’t they get a free pass?

 As if the sacrifice of our Savior isn’t enough, there ought to be more, as if spending a lifetime in his grace and wonder is not reward enough. Sometimes the more we live in God’s grace, the longer we have had God by our side, the less we may recognize the amazingness of God’s grace. As Scripture states the one for whom much is forgiven, much love will be present. But God’s grace is sufficient for both. On the other hand, your work for the church over the years just might be the proof of your love for your Savior and for this church.

 Psalm 100 reminds us over and over again the reason why we ought to count ourselves blessed and lead a life marked with Thanksgiving. God made us. The Lord is good, vs. 5 states, or as we like to say: God is good…all the time. His steadfast love endures forever.

 The unfairness of God is seen in the fact that his steadfast love endures forever regardless of whether we are aware of it or not. If it were up to us, I’ll love you but only if you love m back. It isn’t fair how much God loves us.

 This Thanksgiving that is reflected in Psalm 100 has to then naturally permeate our every day life. You know, my friend is right, God isn’t fair, he provides salvation for all who would call upon his name.

 This week I visited the preschool classes and talked to them about Thanksgiving. At the end we went around the room and each kid told me one thing for which they were thankful. Their mom and dad, their cats, the list went on and on. They couldn’t stop. Some of us this year as we face a recession, a terrible scandal, maybe it is a year to write off because of your health, you may think there is nothing for which to be thankful. So let me start.

 I am thankful for the 50+ year members. If you could stand please when I call your name. I am thankful for the 10 confirmands. I am thankful for people getting carried away with their talents reproduction. I’m thankful for my Bronkema family, and the over 20 of them that will be with us for Thanksgiving. I’m thankful for Jesus my Savior without whom I would have been one of the goats living for myself and not knowing any better.

 I think that when we hear that God is not fair we should all say: Gracias a Dios. Amen.