

Requiescat in Pace – Arlene Zoumbos

November 1st, 2024

Isaiah 55:1-13

1 Corinthians 15:51-58

Matthew 5:1-11

We are in the last few Sundays of the church year. The church year, unlike the calendar year, does not begin on January 1st. The church year begins with Advent. Advent is the season that precedes Christmas. The new church year begins on December 1st this year (the first Sunday of Advent) and the focus as the present church year comes to a close is the end of all things. As you might imagine, the Bible has quite a lot to say about death. Jesus is a straight-on teacher. Pastors are often accused of being black and white. Perhaps you enjoy a bit of gray in your life. Perhaps there are times when gray suits you, where gray speaks to your love of nuance. A funeral is not the time for a bunch of gray. Death and resurrection; the reason that I am here is because Jesus died and rose again 2000 years ago and Arlene was a believer, a Christian, and Arlene is dead. There's not a lot of gray there.

When the church year ends the return of Christ is highlighted. Jesus said that He is going to return on the last day and that we should be ready for that. When everything in this world concludes it is going to be pretty black and white. Life vs. Death; Heaven or Hell; Grace, mercy, forgiveness or judgment, wrath, and condemnation – there is no gray, no in-between, no third category in any of that. The reason that I'm telling you all this is that as I survey Arlene's life one parable comes to mind. Jesus is teaching His disciples about His return. "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats" (Matthew 25:31-32). Do you know this parable? The sheep and the goats – it's a black and white parable. It's awesome to be a sheep. It's a total drag to be a goat, at least in this parable. And there's one distinguishing characteristic between the two.

Jesus tells the sheep, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Matthew 25:34). Remember, this is a window into the Last Day, a heaven or hell window, and the sheep are brought into heaven – that's the idea. Then Jesus explains why. "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me" (Matthew 25:35-36). The sheep are incredulous. They ask the obvious question. "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you?" "When did see you and stranger and welcome you?" By asking the question, the people who are the sheep in the parable are saying that they never saw the King in any of these predicaments. But then comes the kicker, the central point, the reality that lies beneath Christianity, lies beneath faith, lies beneath Arlene and this funeral. The King said, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me" (Matthew 25:46).

Arlene was generous. Arlene was charitable, gracious with her resources. Arlene looked beyond herself to assist others. That is a Christ-like virtue. Jesus tells us that when we look after the most easily forgotten folks that we are in some measure, in some marvelous way, looking after

Him, serving Him, rendering aid to Him. Arlene was a sinner. How many of y'all are less than perfect? Me too. That was Arlene. Maybe she was insecure like a lot of us. Maybe she behaved selfishly, like most of us do. Maybe she thought more highly of herself than she should have – welcome to the club. We all are sinners. We all need grace, God's grace, God's pure and unmerited favor. That is exactly what Jesus' cross is – grace. He died for sinners. None of us are born sheep. The Bible says that we love because God first loved us (1 John 4:19). The bible says that Christ died for sinners, once-for-all, the righteous for the unrighteous (1 Peter 3:18). Arlene believed, Arlene *knew*, that Jesus died and rose again... for her. Arlene knew that she was saved by grace.

Arlene had a heck of a work ethic. She likely got it from her father – a blue collar man if ever there was one. Arlene's dad worked at Kaiser Steel and lived through the Great Depression. Arlene knew the value of a dollar. Arlene knew the value of *investing* a dollar. She was a savvy woman, intelligent, bold, driven, unembarrassed about her talent. It's easy for such people to forget others. The hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the stranger, the sick and the imprisoned – Jesus highlights the most forgettable people among us as those that He identifies with the most. Jesus highlights the most forgettable people among us as those that He wants looked after the most. That must seem odd to some of you, but it's true. When we assist the people who are the most marginalized among us we are serving the Lord Christ. Y'all know the saying that "where there's smoke there's fire?" Of course, you do. Well, what's the point? Smoke is an indicator that there's a fire, right? That's pretty simple, right? Okay, but does smoke cause fire or does fire cause smoke? Arlene was a sheep. I'm convinced of it. Arlene is in heaven. I'm convinced of it. Is her being charitable what made her a sheep?

Arlene was charitable because she knew that she was a daughter of grace. The smoke of Arlene's charity was just an indicator of the fire of her faith. We are saved by grace, through faith, when we believe that Jesus suffered for our sins, paid for them with His blood and that for His sake God forgives us. That's what makes us sheep. Now some of you may be thinking, shoot, I don't help the hungry, the naked, the prisoner – does that make me a goat? To be sure, it's not super great to be a goat in the parable. Jesus said the same thing to them that He said to the sheep, only in reverse. When I was hungry you didn't. When I was thirsty, you didn't. When I was sick, you didn't. The goats need an excuse and they need it fast. Lord, when did you see you hungry or sick or naked or in prison and not help you. The answer is pretty straightforward. As much as you didn't do it for one of these, the least of my brethren, you didn't do it for me. "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matthew 25:41). Brutal. What do you suppose the real problem is here, with the goats, I mean? Lack of faith; God's love did not have its way with them and so their love for others failed.

None of you are perfect. None of you are close to perfect. I'm in that boat with you as was Arlene. Perfect people don't need a Savior. The eternal Son of God, who took upon Himself our human flesh, who was born in a stable and hung on a cross – He came to render up His life to save us from sin and death. Sin and death are no joke. You can't take an antibiotic to cleanse yourself from sin and death. Arlene needed more than an antibiotic, more than a skin treatment, more than a home care visiting angel (those visiting angels ladies are pretty cool but they can't save anyone from death). God saw her need. He did not choose the easy part but left His royal

throne and took up the form of a servant. He looked just like us. He laid aside His divine prerogatives, laid aside His divine majesty, and took up the form of a servant, being found in human likeness. It was the Son of God who served Arlene. She knew it. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who laid down His life for the sheep. All of Arlene's sin was put on the Lord Christ and He died bearing it. And He rose. Death could not hold Him. Death is defeated. Easter morning came and the Lord was alive. Death cannot hold us.

This is a funeral. Our sister has died. Christianity is not an abstraction. Christianity deals with what is real. You know it. When one of Jesus' buddies died, a fellow named Lazarus, Lazarus' sisters were confused, distressed, and perhaps a bit angry that Jesus had not been there, had not saved Lazarus from death. In talking to one of the sisters the Lord said this: "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believe in me will never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:25-26). Arlene believed it. That's what made her a sheep. Jesus raised dead Lazarus from his tomb. Jesus has brought Arlene into the kingdom of heaven, prepared for her from the foundation of the world. There is no gray in death and resurrection. It is black and white. Arlene knows the full beauty of God's glory. Gone are her insecurities, her selfishness, her doubts and her fears. Arlene is with Christ. Heaven is her home. Arlene was, and is, a sheep of Christ's flock.