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Wait, Wait – Part II

Matthew 25:31-45; 1 Corinthians 15:20-27a

(Mat 25:31-45) ""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. 32 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, 33 and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. 34 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; 35 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, 36 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.' 37 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? 38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' 40 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.' 41 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; 42 for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43 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.' 44 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?' 45 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.'

(1 Corinthians 15:20-27a) "But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. 21 For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; 22 for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. 23 But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. 24 Then comes the rest, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. 25 For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. 26 The last enemy to be destroyed is death. 27 For "God has put all things in subjection under his feet."

Barbara and I have a saying we sometimes use when faced with some of life's minor annoyances: "*When the Kingdom comes....*" As in, for example: "When the Kingdom comes is there will always be enough extension cords and I'll always know where they are; also, when the Kingdom comes I will never again have a shoelace break at precisely the worst moment. And when the Kingdom comes the evil ways of HandiWrap® will be forever tamed — so that when I tear a sheet off of the roll, that

sheet will always lie down perfectly and placidly, shaping itself to whatever I'm covering uncomplainingly and meekly, instead of rebelliously clotting into a wad of goo that will not go where it is called. And when the Kingdom comes, everyone will **forbidden** from reclining their seats in front of me on the airplane.

Each of you can no doubt add your own examples of what the petty perfections of life might include. In fact, we often fantasize about what might be perfect when we are indeed confronted with the annoyances and frustrations of life. It is that very longing to have things be perfect, that longing for things to turn out well, that is in fact the context in which we should read Jesus' stark words this morning – for they were addressed to people who lived in sometimes difficult times, who longed indeed to see a final vision of perfection come, whose lives were too often frustrated by hunger and want and persecution and who therefore wanted to know and think about how things would turn out in the end – when the Kingdom comes!

And so today we continue our theme from last week on “waiting,” mirroring the time that the disciples were waiting there after the death and resurrection of Jesus and before the gift of the spirit that Jesus promised had come. And if last week's topic was on the “**how**” of waiting – that is, what strategies are and are not helpful when you and I have to wait – today's focus is more on the “**what**” – *what* are we waiting for? Because, indeed, that is the question that must have been on the disciples' minds as they waited there in Jerusalem after this rather vague promise from Jesus; and that is what is sometimes on **our** minds when we wonder what we are, in the end, waiting for – and what that final vision and perfection of things will indeed be like.

Now there have been some folks have decided that what the final perfection will bring is the opportunity for everyone that they don't approve of to finally get theirs. Perfection – “When the Kingdom comes!” – will mean that all those who have

somehow done me wrong will get theirs. All of us are subject to this sort of sin, aren't we? One 18th century preacher once said, in one of his lesser moments, that heaven will have windows so that those who are in heaven can watch the suffering of those who are in hell!¹ But, of course, one doesn't need to pose the possibility of heaven in so nasty a way. The question of what the final perfection will bring – “When the Kingdom comes!” – can be posed in a kinder, gentler and more appropriate way: that is, we do want to know the answer to this question because we do indeed wonder about what it is that we wait for, we do want to follow God to the very end, we do want to be led and lured by the way God intends for things to finally turn out.

Now I cannot presume to tell you the “mechanics” by which the final perfection, the Kingdom, will come. People have been mistakenly attempting that since the time of Paul (who initially thought that Christ's return was to be any day now) and even down to our very own day with the folks who have wanted to say that the world was going to end last summer or that the ancient Mayans somehow “predicted” it would end in 2012. But I must confess that I am much more interested – and I think it is much more important for our faith – to discern not so much the “mechanics” of the coming Kingdom, not so much “the day and hour,” but rather to discern what God wants us to understand about Him as we abide in the assurance that we can trust in God to bring things to a good end, even if we don't know or understand the “mechanics” of it. So what *are* we waiting for? What **will** it look like “When the Kingdom comes?”

Well the vision of the end-time, of what we are waiting for, in our scripture this morning is both inspiring and troubling. Jesus' words here about the last judgment, as it's traditionally called, are **inspiring** because of how they show us our ethical

¹Jonathan Edwards, “The saints in heaven will behold the torments of the damned: “the smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever” in The Eternity of Hells Torments, April 1739
<http://www.jonathanedwards.com/sermons/Warnings/Eternity.htm>

opportunities and duties here and now. Seen in that way, the parable is a vision of the end – “When the Kingdom comes!” – where all of God’s children are fed and clothed and freed; and so it is also in turn a call to us to minister **now** to these ones in the name of Christ. But perhaps the most important thing to notice about Jesus’ words, the most important thing to realize for answering our question of what it is that we are waiting for, what things will be like ‘when the Kingdom comes’ is the fact that, put very simply, Jesus’ words here portray a God who is **just**. And so it offers us the reassurance that indeed at the very heart of things, at the very heart of reality, there is **in fact fairness** at work. And that is important, so important, to know and remember and be reminded of. Because there are times I know that I have thought that there really is no fairness and that too many things happen simply randomly by chance and that there really is no justice at work in things. But this parable reminds us that what we are waiting for is precisely that final and perfect realization of fairness and justice that God wants us to be a part of in this life.

And yet this story of the last things, of what it is that we’re waiting for, is also very troubling. Because think about it: If God is **only** just, **only** fair, and if utter fairness is the **only** principle that is finally at work and if what we are waiting for in the end is for things to be completely utterly fair, then I don’t know about you but I will have to despair: For I know that I have done too many things that I regret, there are too many words I have spoken that I wish I hadn’t, there are too many times that I should have spoken that I did not, too many I took some small joy in the misfortune of someone else. If God is simply and only just, if that is what it is that we are waiting for “when the Kingdom comes,” then, in Thomas Jefferson’s words, *“I tremble when I remember that God is just.”*²

²“I tremble for my country when I remember that God is just!” Quoted by Abraham Lincoln in one of his speeches during the Lincoln-Douglas debates, Columbus, Ohio, September, 1859.
<http://bartleby.school.aol.com/251/8.html>

I would also suggest that this story is disturbing in another way: it seems to divide things up in ways that are simply at odds with our experience of the way people are. Jesus' words presume an very tidy division between right-hand and left-hand people, sheep and goats, the in and the out. But aren't most of us – and aren't most people – *mixtures* of good and bad, courageous and cowardly, noble and naughty? Don't most of us often have a whole slew of mixed motivations for why we do certain things? Haven't we all sometimes done a good thing for a bad reason, or done a bad thing for what seemed to be a good reason? So, what are we waiting for? Well, if this story were the **only** depiction of God then we would both have reason to be inspired by God's final fairness and yet despairing that we will never ever measure up.

And so we turn to another picture of God to be found in the New Testament, another attempt to answer the question of what are we waiting for – “When the Kingdom comes!” – and how will things turn out in the end? In our second scripture this morning, in one of Paul's earlier letters, he is responding to a question, apparently, that someone had asked him about what things will look like in the end. And while Paul's answer isn't nearly as punchy as Jesus' words, it is fascinating; hear it again: “*...in fact Christ has been raised from the dead... [and] all will be made alive in Christ. But each [will come in its] own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the rest [of humankind], ...For he must reign until [death is] destroyed....*” Do you hear the difference in tone and emphasis? And do you hear what Paul is saying about what it is that we are waiting for? **Not even death can defeat God.** Not even human sinfulness can defeat God. There is not a single human being so awful that the love of God cannot or will not reach them. All – all! – shall be reconciled to God, says Paul. And so the overriding note of *this* vision of what we are waiting for “When the Kingdom comes!” – is not that of fairness but of **mercy**. In the

end, what we are waiting for is not simply God's justice but God's love and mercy. Paul's words tell us that always and forever and even unto the end of time itself, our God is love and mercy unconditional and unbounded.

Let me tell you a story in this regard that is fitting for this Mother's Day. One time when I was about 17, my then-girlfriend showed up at my family's front door during Sunday dinner. And she was clearly and visibly very upset. And she wanted to talk to me. And so my mother put us in the living room, shut the door, and my girlfriend and I talked for awhile. And then she left and I returned to the food that my mother had left in the oven. As she was setting that plate back on the table for me, she sat down beside me and said "*Chuck, I want you to know that no matter what the problem is, no matter what you're dealing with now or forever, I love you no matter what.*" Now, all these years later, I know what was going through her mind and what she feared the problem might be! And even though I now can't even recall what it was that my girlfriend was upset about, I have never, ever forgotten my mother's words and they are the reason that I will always see God as both my heavenly father and my heavenly mother – for the utter and unconditional mercy and love and grace of those words did indeed show me something of what God is like. But, we must nonetheless acknowledge that if utter mercy and grace and love were the ONLY thing we knew about God, that would be troubling too. For you and I know what happens to people who are only shown mercy, who are never held accountable, who have never had any boundaries set for them: they never really learn the difference between right and wrong, they never really learn that with life comes responsibilities. Mercy without fairness can become a pretty sloppy and shallow thing.

What **do** we wait for, then? What "When the Kingdom comes!" – will the shape of things be? Well, Jesus' and Paul's words taken together reveal a both/and: God is

both just **and** merciful. God is both grace amazing **and** fairness demanding. How? *I don't know*. Again, I believe, though, that this is one of those places where it is very important not to focus too much on the “mechanics” of how it will happen, how it **does** happen. How can, how will, God be **both** just and merciful, **both** fair and gracious? I don't know for sure. There are times when I simply don't understand. Moreover, I confess that I fail to understand how God could possibly treat certain persons with mercy. And yet the promise – and maybe the mystery indeed – of the gospel that we serve is that God can be trusted to work with tenacity and care and persistence that all – all! – of creation will ultimately “When the Kingdom comes!” be reconciled to Him. So what, then, *are* we waiting for? We wait in trust in the mystery of God's final love **and** justice, and a God who therefore calls us in the here and the now to minister to everyone, knowing that God works with us to bring creation to a good and beautiful perfection and end.

I suspect that I will never find, in this life anyway, a shoelace that never breaks at the wrong time or that the passengers in front of me on the plane from now will be content with keeping their seats un-reclined. I am fairly sure that HandiWrap® will continue to exhibit its wanton ways. And I know that each one of us will continue to be a marvelous and muddled mixture of good and bad, courage and cowardice, self-transcendence and selfishness. But though life and the people in it will continue to be complex and ambiguous, though there still continue to be people who do terrible and evil things, though perfection seems ever so distant sometimes, our hope and our comfort and our inspiration is with the God who promises us that in justice and in love all things **will** be made complete and whole in God's own eternal life. **That's** what we wait for – “When the Kingdom comes!” And for that very good news, thanks be to God!