

Could It Be That Simple?

[Text - Matthew 25:31-46]

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Today is the last Sunday of the Church Year, the day when Christians traditionally celebrate the coming and completed Reign of Jesus Christ. Just as our new Church Year begins next Sunday with Advent - a Season of anticipating and awaiting Christ's birth - this old Year ends with a similar spirit of anticipation, as we await that day when Christ's perfect love and peace will reign throughout the earth. So this morning, we think about Christ coming among us - not just as a humble baby in a lowly manger, but also in the full grandeur of Divine power, glory and might!

Now I'll admit that from a P.R. perspective, the coming of the Christ Child is a far easier sell than the idea of Christ returning to rule the world with unwavering justice! It's certainly more fun to throw a birthday party, than to anticipate a day of ultimate judgment. Plus, Christmas has been intermingled with images of *Santa*, and a wide variety of delightful holiday traditions and treats; while the Coming Reign of Christ is intermingled with images of *Satan's* final stand, and a wide variety of world-ending plagues and pestilence. So let's see...hot chocolate and jolly elves, or burning brimstone and demons from the abyss...which focus shall we choose to highlight? Actually, this isn't the choice you and I face. Honoring Christ's coming among us, whether it be as a vulnerable baby or a victorious ruler, isn't about picking which scenario we prefer. It's about choosing to follow a radically new way of living. It's about recognizing the awesome ways that Jesus Christ affects our lives from birth to death, and impacts our world from beginning to end.

In commemorating the Reign of Christ Sunday, the emphasis is often placed on the future and final dimension of Christ's Reign, which is an appropriate way to observe it. However, since I have no idea as to when or how Christ might return, I can only talk about how Christ can rule in our lives right now. I realize that for some, it's a lot more

exciting to speculate about cryptic Biblical signs pointing to Christ's future coming; but I can't think of a better way to prepare for someone's future arrival, than to live as if that person were actually already present! So if you and I really want to get ready for Christ's coming, then living those core values that Jesus Christ proclaims seems like a great way to do it.

According to all the Gospel accounts, Jesus Christ gives his followers only one personalized, specific commandment. On the night before he dies, he tells them "This is my commandment: that you love one another, just as I have loved you. By this shall all people know that you are my followers - that you love one another!" That is our sign, and that's our assignment: "Love one another, just as I have loved you."

When we look at how Jesus loves, we see a love that is warm and open, enthusiastic and joyful, giving and forgiving. Jesus meets people right where they are, and rather than telling them how imperfect they are, he tells them and shows them how perfectly they are held and cherished by their Divine, Creative Source. And in the name and power of that Divine Source, Jesus reaches out to all *kinds* of people with welcome and acceptance, wholeness and remarkable compassion. This is the kind of love Jesus lives for, and dies for - a love that doesn't judge, doesn't exclude, and doesn't give up; a love that even finds the capacity to forgive those who seek to destroy it. And after the power of evil, darkness and death has done its worst, that deeper power of Divine Love and Light and Life *still* rises-up triumphant - to reign throughout the ages!

Today, as you and I await that future day of final triumph, our instructions are loud and clear: Love one another; practice fairness; show kindness; and graciously share our lives with one another. For when we do these things, you and I actually help usher in that future and final Heavenly Realm. Simply praying "Thy kingdom come...on earth as it is in heaven" just doesn't cut it. It's about how we live and act in the here-and-now that truly matters. And according to Jesus, our present-day actions hold *eternal* ramifications.

There's a story about a man who dreamed that he had died and gone to hell. He's surprised to discover that hell contains a huge banquet table, covered with all kinds of delicious food. But then he notices that all the people sitting around that table have wooden boards attached to their arms, so they can't bend their elbows to eat the food which sits right in front of them. [That certainly would be hell!] Later that same night, the man dreams that he once again dies, but this time goes to heaven. He's shocked to see that heaven contains the exact same banquet table, and that the people at that table also have boards attached to their arms. But rather than trying, unsuccessfully, to feed themselves, these people take the food and simply offer it to those around them, so that everyone is filled and all are satisfied. And *that* is what makes it heaven!

Even though this story images heaven and hell, it's really a story about how you and I create heaven - or hell - right here on earth. The earth can produce ample food and resources for all people to be fed and clothed and housed. However, when we waste and destroy massive resources waging war, countless individuals face the hell of pain and violence and loss. When we refuse to share with one another, untold numbers suffer hunger, emptiness and want. When a tiny minority of this world's population amass, control and hoard the vast majority of this world's wealth and resources, millions of others needlessly suffer and die. And while you and I can speak-up and try to change "them", our most effective and immediate course, is to take action ourselves - to increase our efforts to feed the hungry, clothe the needy, comfort the afflicted, and embrace the lonely and lost. Because if you and I truly desire to promote the *future* Reign of Christ on earth, right *now* is the only time we have to help bring about its glorious manifestation.

In Jesus' parable, all those gathered indicate that they would have been quite willing to feed or clothe or comfort that Sovereign One, if only they had seen him in need. Apparently, they *had!* They just didn't recognize him because he was presented to them in the form of a hungry child, a suffering widow, an incarcerated gang member, an

“illegal” alien, a neighbor in need. How often in Life people say, “If I had only *known*, I would have done things differently!” Well, now we know! So let’s keep our focus, and keep-on caring and sharing and working, until Christ’s Perfect Realm of Peace and Love becomes our every-day reality!