

Boy Scout Christianity
1 Corinthians 7:25-35
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First Christian Church
Independence Sunday

René and I have been married 39 years. If you asked René my most annoying habit over those years she would answer, “Rick is often late.”

Alas! It’s true, I’m sorry to have to admit. *BUT*, I am nowhere near as late as Jesus, whose arrival we have been awaiting nearly 2,000 years!

You see, Paul and all the other early Christians believed Jesus would return any day, certainly in their lifetime. “*For the present form of this world as we know it is passing away,*” Paul says. So when he advises single people to remain single, married people to remain married, and everyone to basically stay put in their relationships, he’s just saying, don’t make any big changes in your life because Jesus is coming again and the world as you know it is about to pass away.

But then days turned into weeks, weeks into years. Finally decades passed and Jesus didn’t return. This left the church with a big problem. As René’s and my former theology professor Clark Williamson remarks, “The delay of the Parousia (the Second Coming) is the crisis that hangs over the entire New Testament!” Clark could’ve gone on to say, this delay remains a problem for us even yet; because none of us knows quite what to do with it! If a text about Jesus’ imminent returns crops up, we preachers prefer to overlook it than deal with it! And when we hear some group claim to

KNOW FOR SURE that Jesus is *about* to come again, we slough it off as nonsense.

So it looks like Paul was wrong about the Parousia—or at least wrong about the timing of it; and this makes us wonder whether passages like this offer a relevant word for us.

You see, we're caught in a dilemma here: On the one hand, we know Paul was wrong about Christ's return. The Second Coming seems like it's a long way off, and this implies there is no moral or spiritual urgency to our lives. Jesus is taking his good time, so, what's the rush for any of us to mend our ways or to seek transformation? Judgment Day and the end of the world as we know it seems a long way off. Why should we be worried, or think that we have to be morally or spiritually accountable to anything or to anyone but ourselves! Such a *laissez-faire*, "decaffeinated"¹ attitude easily results in hedonism and incessant pleasure-seeking or nihilism and the idea that we can "eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we may die!"

On the other hand, what if we have misjudged the nature of Paul's urgency by too narrowly identifying it with the timing of Jesus' return and, as a result, mistakenly thought we had all the time in the world? Maybe there's a better way than preaching from street corners and holding placards spouting "THE END IS NEAR!" to be faithful to Paul's teaching about Jesus' Parousia. Maybe what we are called to do is to live patiently and

thoughtfully, but also, and quite ironically, with a sense of urgency and accountability, all at one and the same time!

Admittedly, talk of “judgment” and “accountability” sets off our gag reflex, even though Paul’s talk of the Parousia strongly implies both these things. Besides, we preach God’s “radical grace” here. So any talk of judgment and accountability seems totally out-of-place.

Yet, despite our strong belief in God’s unconditional grace, we cannot slough God’s judgment off as the sole theological property of the ultra-conservative churches. It is always true that grace which has to be earned, is not grace. BUT, we’re not talking of earning our way into heaven here. We’re talking about the kind of spiritual and moral shape God finds us in today, and what parts of our lives God will choose to keep and what parts God will choose to discard when we DO finally meet our Maker, as we all inevitably will. This is the kind of judgment we are talking about here.

I, for one, believe we are probably wrong if we assume God’s grace means God *has* to accept every blemish along with every beauty spot on our soul when at last we show up at the Pearly Gates! In fact, we may already be experiencing God’s judgment, as God lets us live with the consequences of our mistakes even now! After all, it’s what every good parent does so their child may grow up understanding actions have consequences. So God let Israel suffer decades in Babylonian exile after the nation grossly

neglected God's demand of justice for the poor. Jesus spoke of separating the sheep and the goats in his Parable of the Last Judgment for this same neglect of the outcast. While God's grace and patience may give us innumerable second chances and may even be cause for the delay in the Parousia, it's dangerous for us to assume that God HAS to accept everything we are as we enter into everlasting life. Alfred North Whitehead wrote, "Nothing beautiful is lost to God," but he didn't mean by this that God must keep everything ugly too! As wheat is separated from the chaff, so God will parcel out what is beautiful in our lives from what is ugly, useless, and unfit for heaven.

And so, our urgency isn't just about the Parousia, which could occur long after we're dead and gone, anyhow. Our urgency is more immediate. It's about how morally and spiritually fit God finds us for everlasting life!

I think we can all imagine some questions St. Peter is likely to ask us. Things like: Did we seek to love God with all our heart, mind, and strength? Did we make an earnest effort to love our neighbor as ourselves? Jesus' two Great Commandments! Did we count our enemies among our "neighbors?" In the meantime, did we catch a glimpse of how utterly magnificent life is? Einstein remarked, "There are two ways to live your life. One is to live as if nothing is a miracle; the other is to live as if everything is a miracle."

The ancient Egyptians believed that upon death they would be asked two questions and their answers would determine whether they could continue their journey in the afterlife. The 1st question was, “Did you bring joy?” The 2nd question was, “Did you find joy?”² How would we answer?

But our temptation is to postpone or to ignore life’s big questions: For what was I born? Why am I here? What’s my life’s purpose? This is one reason Paul told the Corinthians to “stay put” regarding their marital status. He didn’t want them distracted from the most important question of all: How fit they would be when Christ came! This is also the reason that whenever the scriptures speak of the Day of Judgment or the Parousia, Paul and others employ firehouse words like: “Watch!”, “Stay awake!” “Be alert!” “Go!” and “Do!” These words shout urgency! They say “Be prepared,” *“for you know not what hour the Son of man comes.”*³

Though this call to watchfulness and preparation isn’t just for us! It’s also for future generations. Another question St. Peter may ask us is: How well did we prepare our children and grandchildren for the moral and spiritual choices they will have to make? Did we lull them into some kind of spiritual stupor by neglecting their moral education?

Consider the discovery made after the tornado hit Little Sioux Scout Ranch 3 years ago. Our hearts went out to the families of the 4 scouts who died as a result of the tornado that swept through the camp; really to all the

campers at Little Sioux when the tornado hit. It was a terrible tragedy and a terrible trauma.

But later it was reported that the number of fatalities would have been far higher had it not been for the drills the scouts practiced for all kinds of emergencies including tornadoes. Because they were prepared for any contingency, they knew how to respond to emergencies like this. The result was that many lives were spared. The Boy Scouts lived their motto: “BE PREPARED!”

We all live to some degree as though we will always have an endless stream of tomorrows. It would be morbid and gruesome for us to dwell on the thought of our own death or some catastrophe all the time.

And yet, Paul reminds us there’s a bigger picture: how morally and spiritually prepared we are for God’s future: that new heaven and new earth John of Revelation mentions. Though Paul was wrong about the timing of the Parousia, he was right that no one should neglect their spiritual and moral well-being. He was right in implying that some day all of us will need to make an accounting before God of how closely we lived God’s purposes.

As my pastoral care and counseling prof at Vandy, Liston Mills, once said, “Life means more when we define it backwards: when we begin with our death and work back.” And we know it’s true. Nothing makes us appreciate each day more than a close call we’ve had with death. It’s what

those scouts at Little Sioux realized after the tornado struck: it really is better to “Be Prepared.”

So, Paul realized Christ can come into our lives at any time!

It’s like the urgency former NBC-TV correspondent Betty Rollin learned back in 1975 after she had been diagnosed with and survived breast cancer. In her autobiography *First You Cry*, she advised, “The way to appreciate your own life is to imagine your own death and then wake up each morning to discover you are still alive.”

Consider what would happen if we imagined that Christ had already returned, that we had already met God to make an accounting of our life, that the new heaven and new earth Revelation promises had already come, that we had died—and then awoke to discover we still had one more day. How would we live differently? What would we do with our lives that we’ve never done before? To what purposes would we give our life besides our usual commitment to friends and family?

I think the best answer we could give is captured in this prayer:

God with us, tear open the heavens and shine your light in our darkness; lay hold of our hearts so that we may not be torn from you; breathe your spirit into us so that this clay may live; heal our blindness so that our eyes may see beyond what is to your end of the story; draw us by our longing that meets and matches yours to wait passionately and live persistently toward a world made new. We pray as we live, in the name of Emmanuel, Jesus Christ. Amen.⁴

¹Dennis Bolton, “Decaffeinated Sweet Coffee is No Longer Served in the Advent Church,” *Pulpit Digest*, Nov-Dec 1993, p. 64.

²Quote from Leo Buscaglia

³Mark 13:32

⁴Kate Penfield, “What Are You Waiting For?” *Pulpit Digest*, N-D 1997, p. 44