

Significant Living
November 22, 2020 Paul Purdue

John 2 tells us that Jesus' first miraculous sign was turning about 120 gallons of water into wine. Jesus' mother pressured Christ to perform a miracle to save a wedding feast from the embarrassment of running out of wine. The sommelier chides the groom, "Why did you not serve this heavenly vintage first?" Perhaps this odd first miracle tells us something about following Christ. Religious leaders criticized Jesus saying, "When the Human One comes eating and drinking, the religious experts say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunk, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.'" (Matthew 11)

Jesus described God's kin-dom on earth and in heaven as a celebration. "The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding party." (Matthew 22) "I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who changes both heart and life than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need to change their living." (Luke 15) In the beloved story of the prodigal child Jesus says, "While they were still a long way off, the parents saw the child and were moved with compassion. They ran to the child, hugged them, and kissed them, and interrupted the child's confession saying to the servants, 'Quickly, bring out the best robe and put it on them! Put some bling on their fingers and new shoes on their feet! Call the caterers and build a bonfire. We must celebrate with feasting because this child of mine was dead and has come back to life! They were lost and are now found!' And they began to celebrate... with music and dancing." (Luke 15) I grew up in a church where the deacon board told us we could not have a Limbo contest at our youth Hawaiian party because it was a dance. Thirty two years ago, Connie and I toasted our wedding with flat ginger ale. I thought my abstaining made me holier; it did not. Perhaps you grew up with austere and subdued notions of Christ, church, and heaven. The kin-dom of heaven is like a neighborhood celebration with acceptance, running, hugging, kissing, feasting, toasting, music, dancing, and laughing! One day this pandemic will end, and we can return to these holy in-person practices.

At times we might forget God's kin-dom is a celebration grabbing hold of Matthew 25 to use as a cudgel to prod us into more loving behavior. Legalistic calls for social justice may grow guilt but rarely produce love. Without love our good work becomes a soul draining drudgery. Now the final exam is a sober warning but also an invitation into life, "Come, you who are blessed by our Creator. Inherit the kin-dom that was prepared for you before the world began."

Jesus employs the image of the "Human One" or the NIV's "Son of Man" thirty times in Matthew. The Human One is taken from a strange apocalyptic chapter in Daniel. I like that the Human One, not angels or some heavenly prosecutor, comes to judge humanity. Still, I struggle to imagine Jesus sitting on a throne judging people. When tempted by the devil, Jesus rejected other thrones. Jesus came not to be served but to serve others. Jesus healed people, wore a crown of thorns, and washed disciples' feet. But perhaps this is a coronation celebration: Love finally sits on the throne, compassion thaws every hard heart, mercy overcomes hate, acceptance ends judgment, light displaces the night, and justice rolls down like the mighty waters washing away all evil,

injustice, and oppression. The Human One sets life right. Maybe we need to remember this victory!

Jesus does not explain where, when, how, or in what manner the Human comes will come. In Chapter 24, Jesus warns us not to focus much energy on such matters. But the Human One measures the people like sheep and goats. Unlike modern American farmers, first century shepherds grazed mixed flocks of sheep and goats together in common pastures. In cooler seasons, shepherds lead their flocks back towards the village each night. Goats need shelter to stay warm, but the sheep's thick fleece lets them sleep outside. Each winter's night, shepherds stood at the edge of the village, calling and separating the sheep from the goats. The first century crowds knew this scene well. Goats give milk and cheese to the shepherd's family, but sheep wool provides much greater commercial value.

"The Human One comes in glory." The word glory is *doxa*, from which we get doxology. Glory speaks of the radiance or shimmering presence of God that danced around Moses as he came down off Mount Sinai with the law. Glory might remind us of Christmas lights, Thanksgiving, or Advent candles, a kind of physical embodiment of the light and holiness of God. At times, artists portray this sense of a holy glory with glowing halos.

"Now when the Human One comes in glory and all the angels are with them, the Human One will sit on their majestic throne. All the nations will be gathered in front of them and they will separate the people from each other, just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. They will put the sheep on the right and the goats on the left."

The Human One comes to judge all humanity. Every nation, race, culture, and faith stand before Christ the King. What is on humanity's final exam? Will Christ the King demand our allegiance? Will the angels force every knee to bow and every tongue to confess? Will our final exam involve creeds, confessions of faith, or orthodox beliefs? "Then Christ the King will say to the righteous, 'Come, you blessed by our God. Inherit the kingdom that was prepared for you before the world began. For I was hungry and you gave me food to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you gave me clothes to wear. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me.'"

If you read the Gospels you already know what will be on life's final exam! Jesus gave us the answers summing everything up with two commandments: love God with all that you have, and love your neighbor as yourself. That is it. Maybe some people fail the test because our creeds tout theological claims without mentioning practical matters like feeding people, forgiving trespasses, or resisting injustice? If two commandments are too much to remember, try this one Golden Rule: Treat everyone in the same way you long to be treated. Jesus says that one rule sums it all as well! How shall we live? Well, if someone is hungry, and if we like to eat, then we should feed them. If someone lacks clean water, we might fix the contaminated pipes. If someone is sick, let's give them healthcare! If a race or individual feels oppressed, the least we can do is deeply listen.

Perhaps we fear hearing the truth that might move us to work for justice? If we hope for forgiveness, we forgive anyone. Simple. Elegant. Not as complicated as we like to make it.

The righteous being humble are shocked and surprised that they have been serving God all along. They thought they were simply serving neighbors, strangers, and anyone in need! "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry, thirsty, crossing the border, needing new shoes, lacking healthcare, or imprisoned?" Christ the King gives us words to live by, "I assure you that when you have done it for one of the least of these brothers and sisters, siblings of mine, you have done it for me... Come, you who blessed ones. Inherit the kingdom that was prepared for you before the world began. ... let's celebrate." Jesus invites us into the work and joy of the kin-dom on earth before we die and go to heaven. Perhaps, when we serve all people with love we experience eternal life. Knowing God's love and loving all people may bring the kin-dom of God to us today. God's kin-dom comes when we open our lives to love and feed people, provide clean water, welcome people who differ from us, offer healthcare, work to rehabilitate lives, and release prisoners. Wesley talked about the love of God taking root in our souls, and rooted in love we love people with acts of compassion and social justice

Over 50 years ago, Louis Evely wrote, "To believe in God is to believe in the salvation of the world. The paradox of our time is that those who believe in God do not believe in the salvation of the world, and those who believe in the future of the world do not believe in God. Christians believe in the end of the world, they expect the final catastrophe, the punishment of others. ... To love God is to love the world. The hope in God is the hope for the salvation of the world. God seeks among us sons and daughters who resemble God enough, who love the world enough, that God could send them into the world to save it." (From "In the Christian Spirit" in reprinted in "A Guide to Prayer for Ministers and Other Servants")

The final exam would be a beautiful story without the damned goats. Some dismiss hell as opposed to God's grace. Some argue acts of inhumanity demands justice. Some see a stern parable. How could a loving God allow people to suffer eternal punishment? How can only faith, hope, and love remain if someone is stuck in hell? And yet the story goes that those who did little or nothing for the least of these, will endure suffering initially prepared only for devils.

In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul tells us that we see imperfectly. However, one day God will make it all clear. We will see the Human One face to face, surrounded by love. Maybe it is love that transfers us from spiritual death to eternal life. Could it be that when God's love allows us to see Christ's face in the face of another human being facing hunger, fear, or rejection, we are born into eternal life? Maybe we are born again when love melts our hearts of stone, and we see Christ in all suffering. Are we not fully alive when we reach out with God's love, knowing the ways we treat enemies, strangers, prisoners, and poor people are the ways we treat God? Perhaps, we are born into life eternal the moment we slide our shoulder under a cross we did not create so that "the least of these" might find a better life. When we see Christ's face in every face, God's kin-dom

has come on earth as in heaven. Christ is with us; God's kin-dom comes as we provide food, clean water, welcome, healthcare, justice, community, faith, hope, and love. Perhaps we remain in a self-selected hell until that glorious resurrection day when we die to our selfishness and choose to live with nothing but love. Oh come, let us build Christ's kin-dom on earth as in heaven; let us celebrate the Human One with feasting, running, music, dancing, laughter, hugs, and kisses. As we live in Christ, let us see Christ in every face we see. Amen.