

NOVEMBER 16, 2014: THIRTY-THIRD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR  
Proverbs 31:10-13, 19-20, 30-31 I Thessalonians 5:1-6 Matthew 25:14-30

I recently came upon a unique Eleanor Roosevelt quote: “Success in marriage,” the former first lady said, “depends on being able, when you get over being in love, to really love.” I’m certain today’s three sacred authors would have applied that insight to more than just marriage. The fervor with which we start relationships and projects never lasts. The only force which keeps them going is our determination to make them go.

The author of Proverbs, in describing the “worthy wife,” agrees. “Charm is deceptive and beauty fleeting . . .” It’s clear that what might have attracted her husband to her in the beginning isn’t what’s keeping him in the relationship now. Though most modern wives cringe when they hear the “wifely” qualities for which our sacred author praises this special woman – today’s liturgical passage is just a small part of the whole good wife pericope - everyone agrees this is one determined marriage partner. Nothing comes in the way of her dedication to her husband and her family. She’s going to be a faithful wife and mother, come hell or high water, until the day she dies.

Paul expects the same determination from his community in Thessalonica. But he’s not concerned with hell or high water breaking into their lives; he’s more worried about something which didn’t happen: the risen Jesus’ Parousia.

The earliest followers of Jesus never imagined they’d be into this dying/rising stuff for more than a few months, or, at most, a few years. They expected the Christ (Paul’s term for the risen Jesus) to arrive quickly and take his disciples with him to their eternal reward. But, almost 20 years after Jesus’ death and resurrection – when Paul writes I Thessalonians – that event still hasn’t taken place. Slowly but surely, their faith experience is changing from a short term to a long term experience.

Though in today’s pericope Paul is still encouraging his readers not to give up hope in Jesus’ imminent Parousia, he’s also forced to encourage them to adapt to this unexpected set of circumstances. Just as a married couple is obliged to begin to love after their “in love” period vanishes, so other Christs are obligated to continue to imitate Jesus in their daily lives even after their fervor for his return starts to cool. One’s determination to carry through on his or her commitment is more powerful than the circumstances in which that commitment is actually lived. “Therefore,” the Apostle writes, “let us not sleep as the rest do, but let us stay alert and sober.” Until the in-love returns, we’ve got a lot of actual loving to do; until Jesus returns, we’ve got a lot of dying and rising to do.

Perhaps that’s why Matthew, writing more than 40 years after the historical Jesus’ death and resurrection, has his Jesus tell a parable about the talents three servants receive. Those who manage to increase their money are complimented: “Well done, my good and faithful servants. Since you were faithful in small matters I will give you great responsibilities.” The one who returns the same amount he was given is cut down by his master: “You wicked, lazy servant!”

Then, in an anti-Robin Hood statement, the master says, “To everyone who has, more will be given . . . but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.”

Matthew’s Jesus seems to be talking about one’s faith. To those who act on their faith, more faith will be given; those who don’t act on their faith will eventually find their faith has disappeared. When it comes to Christian faith, like our love of others, if you don’t use it, you’ll lose it.

## NOVEMBER 23, 2014: CHRIST THE KING

Ezekiel 34:11-12, 15-17 I Corinthians 15:20-26, 28 Matthew 25:31-46

We always run into problems when we deal with biblical titles. We often have our own definitions for them. Yet, as students of Scripture, it's essential we make an attempt to surface the meaning the original sacred authors gave them.

Though, for instance, Ezekiel is referring to kings in today's first reading, he defines a Jewish king in completely different terms than his 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE pagan contemporaries defined their kings. For this exilic prophet, the first prerequisite of a king is his ability to shepherd, not dominate his subjects. Imitating Yahweh's concern for his people, a good Jewish king rescues (his sheep) from every place where they are scattered; he pastures his flock and gives them rest. He brings back the strayed, binds up the injured, and heals the sick. Concern for his people's well-being always trumps concern for his own well-being. Ezekiel is convinced there are kings, and then there are Yahweh's kings.

When Paul, in today's I Corinthians passage writes about Jesus "reigning," he's concerned with just one aspect of that reign: the life it offers to others. Presuming Adam's sin opened the door to death, the Apostle shares his conviction that Jesus' resurrection opens the door to life. "For since death came through man, the resurrection of the dead came also through man. For just as in Adam all die, so too in Christ shall all be brought to life."

If, like Paul, we symbolically look at the risen Jesus as a king reigning in our everyday lives, then we have to be certain what this particular king is trying to accomplish by that reign. The answer is simple "that God may be all in all."

Teilhard de Chardin taught that when that event finally happens, we've reached the "omega point" of the universe's existence. For this well-known theologian, all creation is geared not only to God being all in all, but also to our discovering God in all.

Matthew's Jesus tells us at what point that process begins.

In announcing an exam to our students, we teachers always know the first question they'll ask us: "What's going to be in it?" They logically want to know on what they're going to be examined. Jesus leaves no doubt on the subject matter for which we're responsible at the end of our lives. He simply expects us to report on how we've found God in all. Of course, as the risen Jesus, he/she is God in all.

The great Hans Walter Wolff frequently remarked that if Israel had no poor or helpless, Israel would have had no kings. Jewish kings only came into existence in the 11<sup>th</sup> century BCE because the country's poor and helpless couldn't live fulfilled lives without their assistance. That's why, as Ezekiel mentioned above, Jewish monarchs were committed to building up their people, not themselves.

Following that logic, if we're other Christs, and Christ is our king, then we're expected to reign as he reigns. We have to put people at the center of our lives, especially those people whom we can easily run roughshod over, those individuals who constantly face every day from a position of weakness. Just as the historical Jesus experienced the reign of God in the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, and the imprisoned, so his followers are expected to experience the risen Jesus in those same people. Our final heavenly exam will revolve around how we, like Jesus, treated and related to them. God only becomes all in all when we're convinced God actually is all in all.

If we dare employ the title Christian – other Christ – about ourselves, we'd better be certain how that title is defined by the biblical first Christians.