

The Rev. Ryan Fischer  
St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw  
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Lectionary Year B: 1 Corinthians 7:29-31

In this second installment of our sermon series on First Corinthians, we're confronted with some advice from the apostle Paul that seems downright bizarre. Had we no idea of what influenced Paul's thinking, it would be easy to dismiss it all as wayward rantings. Why, for example, would some of the things that we treasure in life -- like our spouses, our possessions, and our dealings with the world -- be regarded as mere distractions from our holier pursuits? Paul writes, "Let even those who have wives be as though they had none" (7:29b). What on earth does that mean? I can't imagine telling any couple, "Even though you're married, live as though you aren't!"

The first-century Christian mind, however, would be preoccupied by the imminent return of Christ. Think, now, of one of the simplest and most fundamental confessions of our faith (found, for example, in Eucharistic Prayer A in the Prayer Book); it says, "Christ has died," "Christ is risen," and "Christ will come again." We're going to focus on the "Christ will come again" part here. This is a branch of theology that deals with the End Times, and, if you want a really good five-dollar theology word, it's known as eschatology by those of us in the business. Christians have lived -- and continue to live -- in the hope of Christ's return, where the living and the dead will be judged and the people of faith will be saved.

Exactly when this would happen, though, has been a source of confusion and arguments among Christians forever. Early Christians, Paul included, believed that Christ would return in their lifetimes, so there was a greater sense of urgency, which led to a greater emphasis on preparedness and vigilance. Think, too, of Christ's own words from the Gospel of Matthew: "Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming" (24:42).

Realizing this, early Christians thought it would be best to free themselves of the world's distractions so that they might better prepare themselves for the Lord's coming. It's unthinkable today to regard marriage, for example, as a "distraction" within the Christian life, but, in Paul's time, the heightened sense of urgency for Christ's return led both him and many early Christians to precisely such conclusions. I would add, as well, that Paul was never married himself, so he may not be completely qualified to speak on the benefits and drawbacks of marriage.

Another thing to remember would be the hard times that plagued the ancient Greek world as Paul wrote to the church at Corinth. Noted scholar N. T. Wright recalls a grain shortage that led to widespread famine especially among the poorer Greeks. As we well know, times of crisis get people thinking about end-of-the-world kinds of things, and Paul and the church at Corinth are no exception. N. T. Wright draws the parallel between the Greek grain crisis and the "crisis" to come in Christ's return. The grain crisis will come to an end but even after that the specter of the

Lord's coming still looms. Note, however, that we're not dealing with "signs" of the end times, where events are assumed to indicate that the end is near; that can of worms can be taken up when we get into the book of Revelation.

As for the thought of crises coming and going, we remember the old saying, "This too shall pass." We've certainly been beaten up by a lot of things over the past year, not the least of which being a pandemic, but everything apart from our relationship with God in Jesus Christ will come and go. To that effect, Paul says, "For the present form of this world is passing away" (7:31b). Think about that: If all our worldly possessions and even our spouses themselves come and go, what do we have left? We have Christ. And that means we don't have to get so caught up in the finite things of this world because we have the infinite -- God -- who wraps us in his eternal embrace and protects us especially in times of crisis.

But it is still not easy to swallow Paul's advice to put our relationship with God over, say, our relationship with our spouse. Wouldn't it be better to say that the Lord belongs between two married persons rather than over each of them? And what about our relationships with material things? Should we discard them all and live in a shack out in the desert? Certainly, if we abide only by the letter of what Paul wrote, this would be our conclusion...but the spirit here is much different. The spirit of this text would advise us to keep everything in perspective. If God occupies the number one spot in your heart, mind, and soul, every-

thing else will fall into place as it should. So are all our earthly attachments -- including our spouses -- mere distractions that draw us away from God? Absolutely not! The key, however, is to have everything properly ordered, and this is summed up beautifully by none other than Christ himself; in the Gospel of Mark, we read, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength," and then, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (12:30, 31).

First, love God. Second, love neighbor. After that, everything will regulate itself. Unfortunately, this isn't the easiest to put into practice.

What this allows us to do, though, is cling all the more tenaciously to Christ when times are tough. Even when your house burns down, you still have the Lord. Both good times and bad times come and go, but Christ is your constant.

And he will come again.

He will come again to bring us into God's presence, at the eternal feast of the kingdom of heaven. We do not know when that day will be, but we look forward to it with a hope undiminished by crisis, panic, or hard times. As we keep that end in sight, we proclaim this hope to a world that struggles in the present with despair, grief, and sadness. This is a way, too, of putting our earthly relationships and entanglements into perspective; when we live in hope of the world to come, we see all things of this world

for what they are -- finite and often fleeting; when we lose them, it is not the end of the world, so to speak. From there, we can bring a bit of Christ's kingdom into the present, with justice, peace, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

We know, too, that these are the sorts of things our world longs for. I honestly don't believe that many people enjoy being at each other's throats. Sure, some people like to fight, but the majority want peace and contentment (myself included). It is often said that Christ comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable, and, while this likely isn't a hundred percent true, it surely speaks to our times. We long for the comfort of a Savior who hears our cries and walks with us through our darkest hours. Remembering, as well, that our earthly treasures won't last forever, we abide in the eternal comfort that is far greater than that which any earthly comfort could provide.

We will be going into our Annual Meeting following this service, and, if there ever were a time in which perspective should take center stage, surely it is now. We've been forced into hobbling along at part throttle for almost a year now, but we've never had to wonder about how we'll pay our bills or how we'll get things done. We need a faith-based perspective to continue like this, and part of that perspective recognizes that "this too shall pass." The pandemic won't last forever. We will sing again glorious hymns of praise to God. We will greet each other at the Sharing of the Peace with a hug or a handshake. We will see each other's smiles with unmasked faces. At our Annual Meeting, I en-

courage all of you to think about what a post-Covid church will look like, because there'll be a lot of ministries and activities to pick up on where we left off.

And we know, too, that our edifices as well as our spouses, possessions, and dealings with the world aren't mere distractions from what we ought to be doing. They can indeed be very important and need to be treated as such...but they are not of ultimate importance. Only God is. We have God for, among other things, putting the treasures of this world in their proper place, knowing that when they vanish, only God will be left. And, in a way, it is comforting to know that God will outlast everything else in the universe, and that, as God does so, he will bring us into our eternal home.

Early Christians, including Paul, had to make some adjustments relating to Christ's return, and subsequent generations of Christians eventually figured out that it might be very far away in the future. So, can we advise people to live as if Christ were coming tomorrow? Yes, but we need to qualify that a bit by pointing out that there's no need to dump your spouse, sell all your possessions, and quit your job. Rather, we would say that the promise of Christ's return -- and God's very faithfulness itself -- motivates us to place our ultimate faithfulness in God. That's what living as if Christ were to return tomorrow might look like.

Remember, above all, that God is infinitely greater than the relationships and entanglements of this world, and, therefore, demands our total allegiance. This is the only thing we can offer

to God, but, knowing how richly he has blessed us, it's not such an astronomical demand. Steadfast in this faith, we then fulfill what is written in the vision statement of St. Anne's Episcopal Church: "We share the light of Christ by giving hope, bringing joy, and loving each other." Too much to ask? Well, not with a God who's behind us, over us, and with us from beginning to end.

Amen.