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Colorado Springs, Colorado  
November 12, 2017  
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## “In the End Is Our Beginning” - Reflections on A Time of Transition 4. No One. No One.

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 The Message I don't think, friends, that I need to deal with the question of when all this is going to happen. You know as well as I that the day of the Master's coming can't be posted on our calendars. He won't call ahead and make an appointment any more than a burglar would. About the time everybody's walking around complacently, congratulating each other-"We've sure got it made! Now we can take it easy!"-suddenly everything will fall apart. It's going to come as suddenly and inescapably as birth pangs to a pregnant woman. But friends, you're not in the dark, so how could you be taken off guard by any of this? You're sons of Light, daughters of Day. We live under wide open skies and know where we stand. So let's not sleepwalk through life like those others. Let's keep our eyes open and be smart. People sleep at night and get drunk at night. But not us! Since we're creatures of Day, let's act like it. Walk out into the daylight sober, dressed up in faith, love, and the hope of salvation. God didn't set us up for an angry rejection but for salvation by our Master, Jesus Christ. He died for us, a death that triggered life. Whether we're awake with the living or asleep with the dead, we're alive with him! So speak encouraging words to one another. Build up hope so you'll all be together in this, no one left out, no one left behind. I know you're already doing this; just keep on doing it.

*“Build up hope so you’ll all be together in this, no one left out, no one left behind.”* I always get goose bumps reading that line from Paul, which, in its own way, reminds me of the most important thing he ever said, that nothing, nothing will separate anyone from the love of God through Jesus Christ. It speaks to God’s intention that indeed no one be lost, no one be left behind. That all shall in some way, somehow, know the power of love, that, as the saying goes, “Love wins.” No one left behind. No one. I’m reminded of the climactic scene in the recent movie, “The Martian,” where the character played by Matt Damon is accidentally left on Mars all alone for almost two years while those on earth do utterly everything that can be done so that he, too, won’t be left behind, and goodness how they celebrate when he is rescued! [LINK](#) It is God that I imagine cheering like this at no one being left behind as I read these words from Paul.

And yet, I need to confess something to you, and maybe you too have felt what

I'm feeling.

- A man who beat his wife arms himself with a weapon that has no conceivable use outside of the military and slaughters entire families gathered to worship – *and I wonder: how can such a one so evil be included in the Divine love?*
- That same kind of weapon invaded the beauty of a crowd gathered in Las Vegas to enjoy music and 56 people are dead, dozens wounded, lives forever changed – *and I wonder: how can one so evil be included in the Divine love?*
- In my lifetime, born in the middle of the century that was to be the century where there would be no more wars, I have seen evil men practice genocide: babies ripped from their mothers' arms, villages machine gunned, torture perfected on a mass scale in too many places by men professing every kind of religion or none at all – *and I wonder: how can those so evil be included in the Divine love?*
- I see predacious men who have used their power to prey sexually on hundreds of women and even – God help them! – girls, marring their lives forever – *and I wonder: how men so evil be included in the Divine love?*
- I see leaders delighting in enacting social policies that hurt the poor, that make immigrants into monsters to be feared, that take money from those who have too little and give it to those who have more than they will ever need – *and I wonder: how can such evil be included in the Divine love?*
- I see men and women who claim the title of Christian clergy so belittle and so ostracize and so bully those of a “different” sexual orientation or gender identity to the point that a horrifying percentage of these folks attempt to kill themselves<sup>1</sup> – *and I wonder: how can those who cause such evil be included in the Divine love?*

St. Augustine once said that in heaven there will be windows so the saved could look

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.thetrevorproject.org/resources/preventing-suicide/facts-about-suicide/>

down into hell and gaze upon the torments of the damned, those who turned away from God's love and caused undeserved pain and suffering and anguish. I used to be horrified at that characterization, but I confess to you that there is part of me that understands it indeed. It is the age-old question of how do we square God's love with God's justice? If all are loved, if we are all, in some sense, to be saved, then why doesn't that mean that it doesn't matter what you do? **Why** is it important to try to be good and seek to execute, as the Bible says, justice for the widow and orphan, and welcome for the stranger?

These were the sort of questions Paul was also dealing with in his first letter to the church at Thessalonika as they moved through their own time of transition. As we saw last week, Paul went into great detail – detail he later downplays– about what happens to an *individual* at death. In today's reading, his concern is with the more "cosmic," if you will, question of what happens at the end of time, when God brings *history itself* to the end that God wills and hopes. In times of transition and anxiety, speculation about the "end times" grows dramatically. Predictions about the end of the world spike during times of fearfulness. In our own culture, just look at the number of books and movies in the last twenty years which speculate about what life will be like after some sort of dreadful holocaust or worldwide disaster. "The Handmaid's Tale," John Birmingham's "After America" trilogy, and William Forstchen's disturbing series about life after all electronics are destroyed are just three examples. The spate of zombie movies also speak to the fact that we live in fearful and anxious times, and the writers and producers of these works are only reflecting back to us our own worries and wonderings.

Religiously, fundamentalisms of every sort also increase in such times, and people tend to become fearful of those who are "different," tend to draw lines concerning who is in and who is out, tend to be quicker to consign some folks to

judgment. I understand all those urges, don't you? Ambiguity and anxiety are tough to live with sometimes; the urge to grasp for simplistic certainty is powerful, the urge to label and classify and declare some folks in and some folks out is seductive. But still, the question remains that we opened with: how, ultimately, do we understand a God who loves each and all and who also expects justice for each and all? How do we square those two affirmations in the face of folks who deliberately and intentionally and sometimes even gleefully commit awful evils upon their fellow human beings?

It's a tough question indeed. One of the ways that the early Church sought to answer it was by developing the notion of purgatory. Now, like any theological idea, it is possible to abuse it – and, in fact, such abuse 500 years ago this month led Martin Luther to begin what would become the Protestant Reformation. But the **motivation** behind purgatory is a good one. You see, the early church struggled with the same question we are struggling with today and decided that saying that there were some people who were **inevitably** bound for damnation because of their evil deeds meant that some evil was *necessarily* stronger than God's love. So the notion of purgatory was developed which essentially says that God will give folks an opportunity, even after death, to recognize their sinfulness, to seek to make amends in some way, and to repent and realize that God's love is what they want to rule them not the evil of their hearts. A number of our Disciples of Christ forebears in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century came to similar conclusions – although they didn't, of course, use the word "purgatory" – believing that God out infinite love could choose to give evildoers a chance to repent even after death.<sup>2</sup>

So what do we do with all of this? Well, recall that last week I said that Paul's

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<sup>2</sup>Cf., e.g.,  
[https://books.google.com/books?id=-3UtqrX56rgC&pg=PA759&lpg=PA759&dq=moses+lard+on+universalism&source=bl&ots=HjPLms8ECe&sig=UpWRfL6TBxYjMMhoNmW2-1PdJSA&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwix1\\_KFyLLXAhUhLcAKHauAB0AQ6AEIJAA#v=onepage&q=moses%20lard%20on%20universalism&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=-3UtqrX56rgC&pg=PA759&lpg=PA759&dq=moses+lard+on+universalism&source=bl&ots=HjPLms8ECe&sig=UpWRfL6TBxYjMMhoNmW2-1PdJSA&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwix1_KFyLLXAhUhLcAKHauAB0AQ6AEIJAA#v=onepage&q=moses%20lard%20on%20universalism&f=false)

intricate description of the “mechanics” of eternal life – as well as any other specific portrayal to be found in the Bible – are actually metaphors that point to the general, universal, over-arching truth that God can be trusted. God can be trusted. whatever the mechanics, whatever comes. Now or unimaginably later, God can be trusted not to ever stop loving us or this world. God can be trusted. Period. For you see, I believe it is much more important for our faith to discern not so much the “mechanics” of how the end might come, either individually or cosmically, not so much “the day and hour,” but rather to discern what God wants **us** to **do** as we abide in the assurance that we can trust God to bring things to a good end, even if we don’t know or understand the “mechanics” of it all, even if our minds and hearts cannot grasp how ultimate love and ultimate justice can exist together.

Moreover, it is **because** of that very trust that we can and should be both freed and motivated to seek to live our lives well, to live them morally, to live them in a way that seeks to serve this world instead of simply taking from it. Consider, for example, another famous description of what the end of time will look like, Jesus’ parable of the sheep and the goats. In that parable, it says that Jesus will be asking some questions about whom we clothed and fed, about which vulnerable ones we tried to protect, about which of the poor we tried to help, and which ones we tried not to leave to the cruel machinations of xenophobia and hatreds and biases against class or race or gender or ethnicity or orientation. Is Jesus’ parable a “literal” description of the final end of things? I don’t know. But frankly, I don’t think that’s the really important question here, nor the real point that Jesus was making. Rather, this teaching, this parable, is the reminder to us that we are called to be creators of the good **with** God. For God has created us, sustains us, loves us, enfolds us in the divine arms and always seeks our good and never to harm us. And unlike all those zombie apocalypse movies and shows that say that the way to deal with the end of things is to huddle in a small group of “the

chosen,” ignoring the world and its ills and not caring about those who will not be “saved,” Jesus’ parable asks us instead to join in helping God to create a world where more folks are housed, more folks are fed, fewer folks are marginalized and hurt and abraded by injustice or by ideas which demean and dehumanize them. When Jesus says in His parable, *“Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me,”* he’s not simply scolding or threatening; no, He’s offering you and me the **opportunity** and the **challenge** to join Him in His ministry of feeding, of loving, of caring, and of justice. And, what’s more, he is asking us to confront those who would do the sort of evil things that I opened with, to resist them, to not become cynical or jaded, to do all in our power to change their hearts and their actions so that there might be fewer such folks to break God’s heart and thumb their noses at God’s justice.

Do you see what has happened here? We’ve moved, if you want to put it in geeky grammatical terms, from the third-person to the first-person. We’ve moved from trying to understand how God could possibly combine an unconditional love and the expectation of justice regarding certain other folks to asking instead how God’s unconditional love and justice can inform and motivate **us**. We may never get a satisfactory answer to the “third person” theological question about “them.” And make no mistake, that frustrates me; I have no final truth for you on exactly how God’s love and God’s justice can coincide and exactly how God will resolve the terrible questions that such evil raises. But Jesus’ words about the kind of folks he calls blessed and Paul’s words about no one being left out or left behind are, in the end, best read and best understood as a challenge to **us** to be the sort of people who would try to alleviate suffering and injustice, evil and avarice, profiteering and persecution, discrimination and dehumanization. To be the kind of people that Matt Damon’s character describes in a scene that was unfortunately cut from the final version of “The Martian”; there’s a bit of

rough language but listen to his powerful words: [LINK](#)

May we also be ones who, following our Lord and Savior, would help Him in His task, as Paul says, of building up hope, of making sure that no one is left out, no one left behind, from God's love and God's justice. For truly Paul is right: we **ARE** all in this together. Thanks be to God, we are. Amen.