

The Meaning of "When He Cometh"

A Children's Talk by the Rev. Malcolm G. Smith

Bryn Athyn Church Community Worship Service - May 21, 2023

- We're going to be singing a song – that's why Mr Bier is here.
 - It's probably a song that you've sung before.
 - We're going to talk about what it means.
- It's called "When He Cometh..."
 - That's an old-fashioned way of saying, "When He Comes".
 - Who do you think it's talking about? (The Lord)

- This song is based on a couple of different passages from the Lord's Word about what will happen when the Lord comes.
- Here's one of them from the prophet Zechariah:
 - Zechariah 9:16,17
 - The LORD their God will save them in that day,
As the flock of His people.
For they shall be like the jewels of a crown,
Lifted like a banner over His land—
For how great is His goodness
And how great is His beauty!

- The song puts it this way:
 - *"When He cometh, when He cometh to make up His jewels, all His jewels, precious jewels, His loved and His own...."*
- The Lord is coming to make up His jewels – to make something into precious jewels that He loves and are His own.
- He's going to find the perfect spot for each of those jewels in His crown so that they can shine beautifully together, like the chorus of the song says.
 - *"Like the stars of the morning, His bright crown adorning, they shall shine in their beauty, bright gems for His crown."*
 - Let's sing the first verse and the chorus together.

- I've got some jewels here.
 - You can see how they sparkle.
 - The second verse talks about the Lord gathering gems and jewels.
 - *"He will gather, He will gather the gems for His kingdom; all the pure ones, all the bright ones, His loved and His own...."*
 - To gather things means we have to look for them and find them where they are.
 - Can you see any gems and jewels that might be hidden around the chancel?
 - The Lord does the work to gather every single gem and jewel that is precious to Him.
 - Let's sing the second verse together.

- The question now is what are the gems and jewels that are precious to the Lord?
 - The Lord likes pretty rocks but something else is much, much more precious to Him.
 - The song says,
 - *"Little children, little children who love their Redeemer, are His jewels, precious jewels, His loved and His own..."*
 - Children (and all people) are so, so precious to the Lord.
 - You are the ones He wants to gather.
 - Look at this picture of the Lord with some of His precious jewels.

- The Lord knows that sometimes we don't feel very precious.
 - Sometimes we feel lost or by ourselves.
 - The Lord is coming to gather you, like when the shepherd left the 99 sheep to go find the sheep that had gone astray.
 - In just a minute you're going to have a chance to go and find a jewel in a hiding place and you can think about the Lord coming to find you, wherever you are, to gather you and help you find your place in His crown, along with all the other jewels that are precious to Him.

- You are precious to the Lord and You are His loved and His own.
 - He is working to gather you and you can be part of the Lord finding and gathering other people too by treating each person you meet as someone who is precious to the Lord.
 - Now let's sing the last verse of the song.

- Amen.

Gathered, One by One

A Sermon by the Rev. Malcolm G. Smith

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Introduction

- That song we sang after the Children's Talk captures the goal that we're striving towards as a community.
 - To be a community in which I serve you and in which I also have the grace to let you serve me when I need help.
 - A community in which we help each other walk the mile and bear the load.
 - A community in which we share each other's joy and sorrow, all the way to the end of our earthly lives.

- And for generations and also this week, people in this community have shown up for each other in these kinds of ways.
 - These are little tastes of heaven on earth – little experiences of the joy that comes from mutual love and service.

- It might feel like I'm setting up to say, "But..."
 - As if I'm going to say, "That's all true, but..."
- But that's not what I'm doing.
 - Partially I just want to draw your attention to the miracle and blessing that is good community – to take a breath and be grateful for all that is good in this community.
 - And I also want to talk a little bit about what makes good community possible.

- At the first Community Worship Service, in September of last year, Derek talked about gathering and how scattered a flock we can be and how the Lord works to gather us.
 - Today, I want to focus on one principle about how we are gathered.
 - This principle is based on a verse from the prophet Isaiah that someone pointed out to me years ago that has stuck with me since then.
 - It says this,
 - Isaiah 27:12
 - And it shall be in that day,
That the LORD shall thresh grain,
From the ear of the river Euphrates to the brook of Egypt;
and you shall be gathered, one by one,
you children of Israel!
 - This is the principle: We are gathered by the Lord, one by one.
 - Let's look at some of the implications of this principle.
 - We'll talk about the one by one work, then about gathering, then about the Lord doing this work.

One by One

We Each Have Individual Work to Do

- The first implication is that we each have work to do.
- There is work that needs to be done by each of us individually and there's no substitute for it.
 - This isn't a group project in school where we can sit back and hope that someone else will do all the work for us.
 - This project only succeeds if we each do our part.
- This is something that the teachings of the New Church are very clear on.
 - *Secrets of Heaven* 4292
 - If the individual person in particular were not the church, no church in general could exist. The expression "church" is used in everyday language to describe a congregation in general; but each member of the congregation must be a church if that greater church is to exist.
- The church doesn't exist without people to be in it – without individual people in it.
 - You know that thing – "Here is the church. Here is the steeple. Open the doors, here are all the people"?
 - Actually, all the people are the real church.
- The New Church only exists because there are individual people who have the New Church within them.
- The only reason the Bryn Athyn Church has existed and continues to exist is because of individual people choosing to be a part of it and because of the private work that those people do in their own lives.
- Two aspects of that private work are being convicted by our conscience and working on our relationship with the Lord.

Being Convicted By Our Conscience, One By One

- The phrase "one by one" is not a phrase that shows up very many times in the Old and New Testaments.
 - One place where it does show up is in the story of the woman caught in adultery.
 - In that story, the scribes and Pharisees caught a woman committing adultery and they drag her in front of Jesus and a crowd and ask Him whether she should be stoned to death for what she has done (John 8:3-12).
 - The Lord eventually says to them, "He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first" (John 8:7).
 - This is what happens next:
 - "Then those who heard it, being convicted by their conscience, went out one by one, beginning with the oldest even to the last" (John 8:9).
- We are convicted by our conscience one by one.
 - We realize what we have done wrong one by one.
 - We commit to doing better the next time one by one.

- We can certainly be influenced by others in positive ways but a group is so much healthier when the individuals in the group have individual consciences – when they’ve done the work to examine themselves and see their sins.
 - That’s the kind of community we want – that’s the kind of church we need.

Working on Our Relationship With the Lord, One by One

- We also have individual work to do in our relationship with the Lord.
- How to work on our relationship with the Lord is a whole topic by itself.
- For now I just want to share one passage that talks about the work that’s needed.
 - *Secrets of Heaven 7914*
 - The good of love to the Lord, is not received by a person who belongs to the spiritual church unless they exercise self-compulsion; because it is only with difficulty that it is possible for that person to believe that the Lord is the only God, and also that His Human is Divine. Therefore, since that person is not in faith, they cannot be in love to the Lord,... unless they compel themselves.
- This is such a useful idea to me.
- It’s going to take intentionally working on my relationship with the Lord for it to grow and develop and the same goes for your relationship with the Lord.
 - Just like you have to intentionally work on your other meaningful relationships.
- If you don’t feel like you have a strong relationship with the Lord, you can work on it.
 - You can compel yourself to do the work.
- The Lord wants to gather all of us and, in fact, He is working at all times to gather all of us but we have to do our part to be willing to be gathered.
 - One time the Lord said this:
 - Matthew 23:37
 - “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!”
- If we want to be gathered, we each have to learn to welcome the Lord’s prophets, not stone them when they tell us things that we don’t want to hear.
- And the work is going to look different for each of us.
 - We are going to be gathered one by one.
 - It’s useful to read the story of the Lord calling each of His disciples (particularly from the Gospel of John) and to notice how different His interactions are with the different disciples, not to mention all the other followers that the Lord had apart from His twelve disciples and each of their stories of what drew them to the Lord and what made them resonate with Him and want to keep following Him.
 - Your relationship with the Lord is going to be different from your parents’, and different from your siblings’, and different from your friends’, and, in some ways, different from every other person’s relationship with the Lord in the universe.
 - We are gathered by the Lord, one by one.

But We Also Need to Be Gathered

- So there is individual work to do.
 - But that doesn't mean that individual work is the goal.
 - The Lord didn't create us all so that we could each work on our own in our own little corners and never interact.
 - He does it one by one but the Lord is working to gather us all together.
 - It's individual work for the sake of being part of a larger whole.
- The goal of the Lord's Divine Providence is a heaven from the human race – an incomprehensibly big and ever-growing spiritual community in which each person has an individual role and feels a connection to the larger whole.
- And the Lord is always working to bring people together.
- As we read in Psalm 68:5,6
 - A father of the fatherless, a defender of widows,
Is God in His holy habitation.
God sets the solitary in families;
He brings out those who are bound into prosperity;
But the rebellious dwell in a dry land.

Other People Need to Be Gathered One by One

- We have a role to play in gathering other people.
 - We can be the family that God sets solitary people into.
 - We can be the people who keep an eye out for those who are lonely or isolated and try to welcome them.
 - In the parable of the sheep and the goats, one of the six things that the people represented by the sheep did that the people represented by the goats did not is that they took in the sojourner.
 - And the Lord later explains that, when they did that for even the most insignificant seeming person, they did it for the Lord (Matthew 25:34,35, 40).
- Every single person wants to feel seen and known and valued and they need other people to see them, know them, and value them to experience that.
 - Maybe you need that and aren't getting it right now.
 - At the beginning of this talk when I mentioned people showing up for each other in Bryn Athyn, maybe that hurt a bit because you want that and need that.
 - Or maybe there's someone sitting in your pew or just in front of you or just behind you who needs people to show up for them.
 - And there are certainly plenty of people in the broader community who could use to be gathered and welcomed.
 - We can't all be there for every single person but we can try to show up for individuals, one by one, that the Lord seems to put in our path.
- We can easily get overwhelmed if we think of trying to help all the people that need help.
 - We are not omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent so we can't do that and nor should we try to take on God's responsibility.

- But maybe we can think instead of trying to be willing to play whatever small part the Lord wants us to play in the work He's doing to gather His people.
 - The Lord said,
 - John 10:14-16
 - [Jesus said,] "I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own. As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep. And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd."

What the Lord Can Do

- Finally, let's talk about what the Lord can do.
- While we're talking about gathering together in community it seems important to acknowledge that being in community can be very hard.
 - It can be frustrating, confusing, painful, and exhausting.
 - And that can be just in the community of your own family.
 - It can get all the more complex as you move to the scale of a community the size of this church community.
 - I want to acknowledge the hours and hours and hours of work that individual people have put in to serve this community and to stay invested in it.
 - So many conversations, so many thoughts about what we should or shouldn't be doing, so much processing of what's happened, so many disappointments and things that might make us want to pull our hair out, so much going back to the Lord's Word to try to better understand what He's teaching us, so much praying for guidance and praying for strength, so much letting things go and trying to hold on to what matters.
- That's really hard work and sometimes it's hard to feel like that work is worth it.
- But, when individuals are working on following the Lord, the Lord is able to do miraculous things
 - They're run-of-the-mill and totally normal things in a certain sense but they're also miracles..
 - There have been times when I've had to have hard conversations with other people.
 - And, in those times, my mind and heart are often fairly focussed on the difficulty of the situation and the challenging emotions that go along with it.
 - The conversations are still hard conversations.
 - But, when all the people involved are trying to follow the Lord and do what's right, the conversations are so much better than they could be.
 - People own the way that they contributed to the problem and apologize.
 - People try hard to communicate without calling names or attributing blame.
 - People find ways to work together despite having differing points of view.
 - And there's so much more chance of the relationships surviving the difficult conversation.
- We might not notice it but those are all miracles.
 - They don't just happen to happen.
 - That's the work of the Lord.
 - Yes, the people involved are working really hard too but only the Lord can change hearts and help people find love and charity in the midst of confusion and pain.

The Lord Can Find a Place for Each One of Us

- I want to read you one last passage to wrap things up.
 - *Secrets of Heaven* 1285:3
 - The Lord, working by means of charity, affects and acts on each of us in a way uniquely suited to our personality. In this way He fits each and every one of us into the order of things, on earth just as in heaven.

- This is another miracle that we can take for granted.
 - The Lord is the only reason why any of us can work together or be in community together.
 - He is the One making it so that each of us, with our own personality and flaws and limitations, has a useful part to play in the overall order of things.
 - That doesn't just happen to happen.
 - The passage makes clear that what allows the Lord to be able to gather people together like this is the fact that each individual is committed to serving the same goal: "the common good, the Lord's kingdom, and the Lord Himself."
 - If we're individually trying to serve the Lord, the Lord can find a spot for each of us in the larger whole.
 - And notice that the passage says that this happens on earth as well as in heaven and notice that it says that He fits each and every one of us in.
 - And that means that He has a spot and a role for you – not just at some vague future time but right now.
 - The Lord says,
 - "you shall be gathered, one by one, you children of Israel!" (Isaiah 27:12).

- Amen.

If you would like to talk more about this topic, get in touch with Malcolm at malcolm.smith@brynathynchurch.org.