

“What does the inside of heaven look like?”

Acts 7:55-60

John 14:1-14

During my ministry I have said this passage of scripture probably more times than any other passage in the Bible, with the exception of the Lord's Prayer and the 23rd Psalm. That is because it is often used at Funerals. It comes from the portion of the gospel of John which is called the Farewell discourse. Jesus is with his closest companions, for the last time. Jesus knows that he is about to die so he holds nothing back. The ones to whom he has pledged his life and with whom he has shared that life, must be listening closely. They can sense the intensity of Jesus but they have no idea of the events that are about to happen.

This is intended for us as well. It is not just a historical tale, it is a narrative that is both intimate and universal all at the same time. So when Jesus says, “You” we would be wise to listen closely as it is us that Jesus is speaking to.

This puts us preachers in a very awkward place. It is our privilege and responsibility to proclaim this gospel of Jesus Christ, and in all we say, to do our best to make sure that it is clear that the gospel points to Christ and not ourselves. As I prepared this sermon we had a telephone call from a very dear friend in Canterbury. She is one of the most humble, devoted people of faith that I know. Yet she struggles with her faith as well. For many years she preached on a regular basis yet in the last several years she has struggled with being able to speak with authenticity about belief in God. But at the same time as I have gotten to know her better in the last few years I see her care for others, her devotion to responsibilities, her seeking with scrupulous honesty, her humble generosity in multiple ways that I know no one else is aware of. She has taken Jesus caution to heart about beware of practicing your piety before others and giving your alms in secret.

I told her that with each passing year I am more aware that every time I open my mouth to say something about God it is more of an approximation. I have no doubt in my mind that even in the middle of her very real struggles her life will continue to be an eloquent sermon. In the mean time I still have the responsibility of standing in this pulpit and finding some words to say. I stand in front of you as a sinner saved by grace, nothing more and nothing less.

When I was first called into ministry I struggled with that. Once when I was going through a time of discouragement, my Father shared this little story with me. He said, “Stephen, did you know that God is closer to sinners than to saints?”

He had a little smile on his face, as he said that. “How can that be? What do you mean?” I asked.

“Think of it this way. God is in heaven holding each person by a string. When we sin, by our sin, we cut the string. Then in the grace of God, God ties it up again, making a knot – bringing the sinner a little closer. Again and again sins cut the string – and with each knot God keeps drawing the string closer and closer.”

Jesus’ words in today’s gospel are all about God’s action and relationship with us and within us. Jesus speaks to us about troubled and troubling times. He says, “Do not let your hearts be troubled.” I once watched a special about Niagara Falls. They showed some of the barrels in which people had ridden to go over the Falls. Some survived; many did not. When my spirits are troubled within me, there are times when I feel like I am riding the barrel over Niagara Falls – once I am in the barrel it is an exercise in futility to tell me not to go over the Falls – once I am in the barrel I am going over one – but Jesus is saying that spiritually and emotionally there is another choice available, and he describes that alternative choice as “believing in God and believing also in me.”

Be careful here. Don’t get too smug too easy. This is not the same kind of belief as getting all the right answers in a test. This belief does not mean that you have no trouble reciting the Apostle’s Creed from memory every week. It is no less a commitment than getting in a barrel to go over Niagra Falls. This belief is going beyond what we sense is safe, going beyond any of our needs for affection or esteem, it is letting go of our need to be in control.

It is not an easier, softer, more popular way. Jesus speaks of his impending absence, and he describes that absence as a way of preparing a place of incredible spaciousness, his Father’s house. Now, we have chosen to understand this as a description of heaven, some place we might go after we die.

But I want you to notice that Jesus doesn’t use the word ‘heaven’ here and neither does he say that this is where we are going after we die. I think it is wise for us not to put words in Jesus mouth, let Jesus speak for himself. Perhaps we are better off to realize and admit that, just like Thomas, we don’t know where he is going and we don’t know the way, and when we admit that, perhaps then we can get a sense of direction in our lives.

Perhaps that sense of direction comes from not taking a snippet here and a snippet there but increasing our attention span long enough and with enough focus to listen to the fullness of what Jesus is saying through his words, through his suffering, through his death, through his resurrection.

Jesus seems to think that Philip is being more than a little thick with his request to “show them the Father, and then they will be satisfied.” Could we have just one more demonstration, one more parable, one more miracle, one more Something. There is nothing more besides himself.

When Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” This is as personal and universal statement as Jesus ever makes. It is as particular as you can get because that is the way it is with all relationships. By their very nature relationships are very specific and personal, and it is within the specifics and very relationship that is found the rich source of blessing. That is especially true here as Jesus speaks in the most personal way possible. But what about those who seem to believe quite differently than we do? What does this say about people of other faiths?

I want to say some specific things about this passage in relationship to other faiths. I say this not to just make a theological point but because we have reached a point on this earth at which strife and wars and violence could literally destroy all life on earth, and the way we understand our faith in relationship to other faiths is increasingly important.

Jesus is not making a statement of supremacy over other faiths. The farthest thing from his mind was to be superior to Buddhists, or Hindus, or Muslims, or even Jews, especially Jews, because he was one. This little community of radical faith and inclusive love had no power or prestige in their society whatsoever. How were they going to lord it over anyone? This “I am” statement is not a bumper sticker for supremacy over anyone else at all. Nor does it mean that God loves Christians more than anyone else. Nor is it a way of condemning people who don’t believe in the way we do. Jesus is speaking a blessing not a bludgeon. The intimacy of this relationship puts you in relationship with every other child of God.

In the gospel of John what is being said is that in following Jesus as the way, in trusting Jesus as the truth, in experiencing Jesus as the life of the Spirit, the believer comes to a knowledge of God in a wholly new and unprecedented manner: as “Abba.” The believer comes into a relationship with God that is preposterously familiar and intimate and it brings the gift of an expansive love that knows nothing but to give itself away.

It is only in recent times that Christians have even begun to enter into meaningful dialogue and conversation with people of other faiths. One theologian named Harvey Cox has been a part of many conversations with people of other faiths. He says, “I invariably return from a conversation with a genuine believer in one of the other faiths with “who do you say that I am.” But as I listen, I find that I am not putting this question to the other; I am asking it of myself.” He continues.

“From Jesus I have learned both that he is the way and that in God’s house there are many mansions. I do not believe that these are contradictory statements. In fact, I have come to see that only by understanding one can we come to understand the other.¹” It is difficult if not impossible to have a meaningful dialogue with another without a clarity about one’s own identity and Jesus

¹ Harvey Cox at www.religion-online.org

teaching about the gift of indwelling presence of God is central to our identity as disciples of Jesus. The more secure we are in that relationship the more freedom we will experience, and the less competition with others. And from that central core of our identity comes the strength to witness to the truth out of a profound sense of love for the other, even those we count as our enemies, no especially those we count as our enemies.

Often our thinking goes like this. The way of suffering and sacrifice was part of Jesus's divine mission, but he suffered so we don't have to. His words about loving enemies are nice in theory, we say, but we are only human so they are not meant for us. Jesus could forgive enemies, but we are not Jesus. One general put it this way, "It is God's job to forgive, it is our job to arrange the meeting."² The belief that Jesus' path of forgiveness does not apply to us is very tempting, especially when we feel we have been wronged or we are in real danger., but that is not an option provided in the gospel.

This morning we heard the passage from Acts. It is the last part of the story of the first martyr Stephen. Stephen shows us that the impossible ethic of loving your enemy is indeed possible, but it is costly, but the cost is at the heart of believing in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. You don't have to be divine to do what Jesus did. Jesus tells us: "The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do, and in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father."

Stephen started out with the simple ministry of visiting widows and making sure they had enough to eat. He wasn't a do-gooder, he was doing the works of Jesus, but in the process he opens himself to the forces of the world that will not stand for such a witness, and he is stoned to death. Yet, in the face of death dealing stones he clings to Jesus who has already passed through death and has taught him the way. Stephen's final breaths were a prayer, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

The way of forgiveness and peace is narrow and costly but it is always open. During my year living in England I spent a lot of time in Canterbury Cathedral. It was an incredible experience to pray in a church where prayers have been held continuously for over a thousand years. They have not always been prayers of peace and forgiveness. There were many Memorials to wars fought and lives sacrificed in many distant lands, some of which I could not even pronounce and many of which I wondered to myself, "Now, why did that war seem so important at the time?"

But the Cathedral itself was the scene of a murder as well, back in 1170, the martyrdom of Thomas Becket, the archbishop of Canterbury. His death is memorialized every year of December 29th. The year we were there, I saw the current Archbishop Rowan Williams standing on the spot where Becket was

² General Norman Schwartzkopf

murdered. A portion of T S Eliot's play *Murder in the Cathedral* was read. Some of the priests were trying to protect Becket from the king's soldiers who were on their way. They bar and lock the door for safety, but Thomas with a boldness befitting Stephen demands: "Unbar the doors! Throw open the doors! I will not have the house of prayer, the church of Christ, the sanctuary turned into a fortress. The church shall be open, even to our enemies. We are not here to triumph by fighting. Open the door! I command it. Open the door!"

Like Stephen, like Jesus, Thomas also went to his death opposing the forces of evil not with power and not with violence but with faithfulness. We are tempted to hide but the witness of martyrs inspire us to follow the one who overcame evil not by defeating the enemy but by loving the enemy and thus defeating death itself.

Stephen's witness and the martyrdom may seem like they have little relevance to our lives here in Palmetto, but the power of the love of God in Christ Jesus is just as alive here as anyplace else on earth. This week our cluster had lunch together on Tuesday. Jack Martin is the lay representative from Terra Ceia UMC.

I thought Jack looked pretty happy as we visited but after lunch he spoke up. He said, "I want you guys to know that two months ago I had the happiest weekend of my entire life!"

I asked him how old he was, and he told me that he was 85 years old. "The happiest weekend of your life? That is saying a lot. What happened?"

"I attended the Walk to Emmaus"

Tell me about it, I said

He put it this way, "I have always though that I was a pretty good guy, and I was, but that weekend opened my eyes, and I am beginning to see that I have fallen short in some pretty significant ways, but I was completely overwhelmed by how the love of God was expressed to me."

Jesus said that whoever has seen me has seen the Father. I think Jack is starting to catch on. I think that by the grace of God I am starting to catch on. How about you?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

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