

Known by Love

Fifth Sunday of Easter & Children's Sabbath

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Texts: Acts 11.1-18;
Psalm 148;
Revelation 21.1-6;
John 13.31-35

I was reading a book recently that brought me back to my own childhood as the author recounted his experience of trying to imagine as a child what heaven would be like. I can remember being 10 years old lying in bed freaking myself out trying to imagine what it would be like to live FOREVER. Add to my ten year old picture the image of standing around the throne of God singing hymns for eternity – I was not sure that heaven sounded like such a great deal. Although, last Sunday's setting of Revelation from Handel's Messiah does begin to capture some sense of the sheer glory these passages are meant to evoke.

The problem of course was that I heard images like these (celestial choirs surrounding the throne of God) and assumed them to be descriptions of what heaven will literally be like. When, of course, the writer of Revelation was painting pictures to capture the character of eternity and even more particularly the character and essence of God. What the writer of this Revelation wants to communicate above all is that when we come to the end of life as we know it, what we will meet and what we will experience is God – and everything will be made new. In fact, nothing will separate the creation from the Creator. Divine life and human life will dwell together in unimaginable glory and the home of God will be among mortals. If that is what eternity holds, if that is where life is heading, then how do we carry ourselves today as citizens of that future realm?

That is what the book of Revelation was written to do: if this is where we are going then what does that future say to this present moment - to our life here and now? Gordon was right on last week when he suggested to us that the book of Revelation – that the whole of Scripture really – is not about telling us who is in and who is out but rather what is in the realm of God and what must be left behind if we are to become the eternal dwelling place of God.

As we move to the gospel, Jesus has one word to describe what for him is at the heart of God's realm: love. Last week several students getting ready to make a profession of their faith were discussing their credos – something we ask them to share with the elders, which they will do this afternoon following worship. One student wondered whether it would be appropriate to just simply say: love - love one another – that's what I believe. While we did encourage a little more elaboration than that, according to this text that is a perfect confession of faith. That is what we are called to. If you want to know what eternity will be like – it will be the place where love is lived not as a good intention or a rare moment but as the norm. It will be the air we breathe and the ground on which we walk. And as we love one another here and now – we experience heaven on earth.

It's worth noting that Jesus gives this as a new commandment to his disciples. I was thinking about what makes this new and reading some about that this week. The command to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself goes back to Leviticus. This is the frame of Judaism. It's not the command to love that is new. What is new is the way in which Jesus redefines the glory of God. We are to think of God's glory not in terms of conquest but in terms of sacrificial love. One author spoke of the newness of this command as transforming our understanding of glory from "worldly renown to Godly compassion."¹ The book of Revelation is all about the glory of God – how many hymns from that book ascribe to God glory and honor? Jesus defines glory here as the capacity to love one another as he has loved us – without regard and without distinction.

You can see how confusing that is for Jesus' disciples and how hard it is for us get our minds around. We are so deeply conditioned to think of glory as recognition and acclaim. When it is defined in those terms then it is a limited commodity – it is the prize that goes to the winner – it is part and parcel of a world that defines quite narrowly and precisely who is worthy and who is not. Peter doesn't get it. He doesn't understand how Jesus blew wide open the distinctions we make between people. He didn't get it when Jesus first spoke these words. He didn't get it after Jesus spoke to him on the sea shore after his resurrection. He finally gets it in this passage we read from Acts today.

¹ Thomas H. Troeger, *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), pg. 473

There is this wonderful movement in our texts today. The book of Revelation is this vision of eternal glory. It doesn't get much more esoteric than that. Then we come to the gospel and Jesus gives us this beautifully concise definition of what the glory of God consists but even then it is a theoretical discussion about love. Then we come to Acts and we hear a story about a very concrete and specific instance of God's glory being revealed when Peter was pushed to put that love to the test...this is where the proverbial rubber hits the road.

When people ask me what I think is the most helpful and relevant scripture to guide the church as it wrestles with the place of gay and lesbian Christians in our midst it is this passage. This is the turning point in the book of Acts. It is a pivotal moment as the largely Jewish followers of Jesus come to terms with Gentile believers in their midst. What's at stake for Peter is exactly what I hear people raise in these conversations today. Gentiles are welcome but only if they first give up the practices that make them unclean. (That is what the vision of the animals is about – eating animals that are unclean.) Peter learned from Scripture what is clean and what is unclean – what is natural and what is unnatural. This is visceral stuff for him. He is repulsed by the idea of what these Gentiles do. And his thinking was: If they want to join the followers of Jesus then they will have to follow God's Word and leave those ways behind them.

It's interesting to see how this conversion takes place for Peter so that he comes to understand that Gentiles can be welcomed and remain Gentile. The conversion does not come through some theological debate. He has a vision and then that vision is brought to life right before his eyes. Peter meets a Gentile - he goes into his home – meets his family - hears his story - sees the Spirit of God alive and at work in Cornelius. That's what changes him. That's what changed the church in Jerusalem - hearing Peter's story – witnessing how the Spirit led Peter to love Cornelius in the way that Jesus had loved all of them.

You want to see the glory of God revealed – here it is – the church flinging wide its doors offering the love and embrace of Jesus Christ even to those Gentiles. Believe me, every generation can fill in that blank. Every edge of the theological and political spectrum has someone we want to put in that category. We all, myself included, have someone Jesus is pressing us to embrace whom we would just as soon leave behind.

There is a time and place for framing theological arguments and staging public protests. Word on the street is that there will be an opportunity this very week in our little town to engage just that kind of prophetic activity. There is a time and a place for it. But I also heard a story this week that brought this simple truth from John 13 home. It was the story of a person who spent most of their adult life away from the church and skeptical of faith. Then they had an experience in recent days of being welcomed and embraced in a way that felt, from their perspective, totally undeserved. And it sparked something in them that I suspect a theological argument could rarely produce. All their defenses, all their carefully constructed arguments, were silenced in the face of a love extended and received.

I am grateful beyond words for those of you who do the careful and thoughtful work of theology on behalf of the church. I have incredible appreciation for those of you engage the questions of justice in the public sphere and call the rest of us to join you. There is a time and place for those gifts.

But my prayer for us today is that all of us, no matter what our gifts or where we spend our time, that all of us will be known by love...that people will see in us a kind of love at work that stops them short and sparks a question...that leads them to trace the love they experience from us back to the One who loved us first.

The hymns of heaven that sing of God's glory and honor and power and might are to be expressed in our lives through one simple command:

That we love one another as the Risen Christ has loved each of us.

Alleluia! Amen.