

May 18, 2014

Acts 7: 55-60

This passage follows a long episode during which Stephen preached about his faith before a crowd in Jerusalem. He was identified as a threat to the community by the Jewish leaders. Like Jesus before him, he was driven out of town for a brutal death. At the very end we are introduced to one of the nastiest men in this story: Saul.

⁵⁵But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, hardly noticed—he only had eyes for God, whom he saw in all his glory with Jesus standing at his side. ⁵⁶He said, “Oh! I see heaven wide open and the Son of Man standing at God’s side!”

⁵⁷Yelling and hissing, the mob drowned him out. Now in full stampede, ⁵⁸they dragged him out of town and pelted him with rocks. The ringleaders took off their coats and asked a young man named Saul to watch them.

⁵⁹As the rocks rained down, Stephen prayed, “Master Jesus, take my life.” ⁶⁰Then he knelt down, praying loud enough for everyone to hear, “Master, don’t blame them for this sin”—his last words. Then he died.

Saul was right there, congratulating the killers.

John 14: 1-11

This story introduces a vision of heaven meant to calm the fears of the disciples during the time between Jesus’ resurrection and his ascension. It answers the pressing question: who gets to be in relationship with God? The answer is equally simple: those who trust Jesus. This broad invitation has been reduced to a microscopic place by many believers over the generations. They have tried to turn a God who redeems into a God who selects only a very few. Listen to what Jesus taught.

¹“Don’t let this throw you. You trust God, don’t you? Trust me. ²There is plenty of room for you in my Father’s home. If that weren’t so, would I have told you that I’m on my way to get a room ready for you? ³And if I’m on my way to get your room ready, I’ll come back and get you so you can live where I live. ⁴And you already know the road I’m taking.”

⁵Thomas said, “Master, we have no idea where you’re going. How do you expect us to know the road?”

⁶Jesus said, “I am the Road, also the Truth, also the Life. No one gets to the Father apart from me. ⁷If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him. You’ve even seen him!”

⁸Philip said, “Master, show us the Father; then we’ll be content.”

⁹“You’ve been with me all this time, Philip, and you still don’t understand? To see me is to see the Father. So how can you ask, ‘Where is the Father?’ ¹⁰Don’t you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I speak to you aren’t mere words. I don’t just make them up on my own. The Father who resides in me crafts each word into a divine act. ¹¹“Believe me: I am in my Father and my Father is in me.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

THANKS BE TO GOD!

Meditation – “How BIG is God’s house?”

I went on the internet and looked up words used in real estate. One article was called “Fancy real estate listing - fancier verbiage”. What they discovered in doing this research was the more expensive the home, the longer the description of the home. They used words like: exquisite, dramatic, soaring, expansive, sophisticated, luxurious, lush, breath-taking and prestigious. Often to get our attention they use these ones which have become more prominent: exclusive, gated or upscale meaning you’re very lucky if you can afford to live here because we tacitly make sure that others don’t get in. Only a certain type of people can get into this place. That’s the message that lurks behind those words, it’s very subtle but it’s powerful, only certain people belong in these places and others will be kept out. That’s part of the attraction in fact, there will be those that are excluded. How many of you live in a 55 plus building or complex. And part of the attraction is no screaming kids.

I want to take a moment to think about the Gospel readings from John today. It’s very familiar. I read it probably in about 20 – 30% of the funerals I conduct. I will read the old version of it – ‘In my Father’s house there are many rooms and I go to prepare a place for you’ That is a wonderful message. When Jesus says that... it’s like the door’s been thrown wide open. Or has it? Because a few verses, further along, actually in verse 6, it says, ‘No one gets to the Father apart from me’ and curiously, far too many Christians, I think, have attached themselves to that verse and not the earlier part. This one line has been used by generations of Christians to mark their territory. To build a wall to keep people out. To believe that heaven or a relationship with God is their private preserve, like living in a gated community complete with a sentry in a little office, a power gate and close circuit TV everywhere. God’s house or heaven according to many, might have lots of rooms but they’ve got a No-Vacancy sign out, at the front.

Well, it’s been interesting. Some of you have been coming to the Wednesday evening’s Bible Studies, and this Wednesday we heard renowned Cambridge Physicist, John Polkinghorne, talk about whether heaven exists or whether it’s a black hole, as some scientists tell us. He is an interesting fellow who spent the first 25 years of his career as one of the world’s greatest physicists and then in his early 50’s trotted off to seminary to become an Anglican priest. He’s got a foot in both places. But we talked about heaven on Wednesday night and there have been lots of polls done in people’s beliefs. I got the results from 2 of them, the first is from ABC News and what they discovered was that 75% of Americans believe they are going to heaven, 21% think only Christians go to heaven, 60% believe that Christians and non-Christians go to heaven, 80% of American women believe they are going to heaven and only 70% of American men believe they are going to heaven. No explanation why... they just give me the statistics. Then there was another group that did very similar research and they study religious trends in North America primarily. They asked what the criterion was for getting your ticket into heaven. 6% of respondents said God loves everybody, so everyone gets in. 15% said the good people get to go, another 15% said that if you keep the Ten Commandments you get in and 43% said if you confess Jesus Christ as your Saviour you go to heaven. It’s a pretty restrictive place.

You probably are wondering how that story of the stoning of Stephen gets connected to this gospel reading. Think about that ugly story of the stoning of Stephen, he was a follower of Jesus and part of the problem that leads to his death was that he was taking care of the widowers in the community. His policy around that as a follower

of Jesus got him into trouble with the religious authorities in Jerusalem. You almost miss the point of this passage except for a few subtle little bits in there. In the midst of all of this is Saul, he is watching, stoning is brutal; it goes on and on and on. Its hard work to stone someone to death. As the people are throwing their stones they are getting hotter and hotter so they take off their cloaks to keep at the job. The person who takes on the responsibility of watching the cloaks is this fella named Saul. It's almost as if he's the overseer of this heinous act. Just calmly keeping an eye on the coats while the other guys do the dirty business. So is this heavenly mansion with many rooms, does it have room for the likes of Saul. He went on to become Paul the Apostle. He was the supervisor of the stoning of another Christian. Does he get in?

Author, blogger and un-fundamentalist Christian, John Shore, has written much about this. About the notion of heaven, the kind of heaven that has a password and a secret handshake known only to a select few. In an article in the Huffington Post, he says that, "That kind of Christianity belongs to a mentality that feeds on the fears and resentments of men, not on the love and acceptance of God. That kind of Christianity needs enemies to give it purpose and focus and the more enemies it has, the happier it is. That kind of Christianity swaggers and preens and points and scowls and judges and with it's confident brain bravado, opportunistically and purposefully strikes fear in the hearts of perfectly decent people who want nothing more than to know that in some real and lasting way that their human frailties are forgiven. That kind of Christianity revels in pointing an accusatory finger with what it dares to declare is the hand of God. If you have ever been the object of someone telling you that you are not going to go to heaven, it's pretty painful. Now John Shore has also made a cartoon. I think it's great. I'll always ask Patrick first and if he likes it then I show it! So if you don't like it... it's his fault. – Its raw, but it really tells the story of the Gospel. So listen with an open heart and mind.

DIALOGUE

Hello.

Hello.

I am a Christian.

Good deal.

Are you a Christian?

No, but I have nothing against Christians.

Your destiny is to burn forever in hell.

Why would I go to hell, I'm a good person.

John 14: 6 of the bible says no one comes to the Father except through me. That is why you will go to hell if you do not become a Christian.

But saying no one comes to the Father except through me is not the same thing as saying only Christians can get into heaven.

Yes, it is.

No it is not. No one comes to the Father except through me, says only that Jesus decides who does or does not get into heaven. It says nothing at all about being or not being a Christian. It only says that Jesus decides. Saying that it is up to me who gets into this moose lodge is not the same as saying that everyone who gets into this moose lodge is a moose. A child can understand the difference between those 2 things. I'm sure that you can be as rational as a child.

You are blaspheming against God.

Why? How? All I'm doing is listening to the words of Jesus. No one comes to the Father except through me is exactly what Jesus said. But those words do not say that only a Christian can get into heaven. I am sure that if Jesus had wanted to say that only Christians can get into heaven he would have said that only Christians can get into heaven. But he did not say that. He said only that he will decide who gets into heaven. I do not think it is blasphemy to cleave to the words that Jesus actually said.

You need to come with me to a bible study group.

Thank you. But you have already proven to me that you care more about what you want Jesus to have said, than you do about what Jesus actually said. So I'd rather not come with you to a bible study group when Christians show that they care as much about Christ as they do about using the bible as a recruiting tool of an angry and explosionary God. Perhaps I will be more interested in a Christian God. I will take my chances for now and simply love my neighbours in the way that Christ command it be done by all who believe in him.

Wow I must admit that you have given me something real to think about. Do you know I want to thank you for that. God bless you.

So I apologize if any of you were offended. Did anyone learn something? Pope Francis soon after he was elected, was asked about who has a room in God's house. His reply was, "You asked me if the God of the Christians forgives those who don't believe and don't seek the faith. I start by saying, and this is the fundamental thing, that God's mercy has no limits, if you go to him with a sincere and contrite heart. The issues for those who do not believe in God is to obey their conscience." Now that may not be going all the way. But for the leader of the largest Christian community on the globe, it's a pretty radical thought. That suddenly the family of God could be infinitely large because the God at the centre of this family possesses an infinite ability to love and to give.

On the website, 'Beliefnet', Washington DC pastor, Bill Haley, has some serious advice for those who think they control the keys to heaven. He says that when approaching a question like "Who goes to heaven?" We need to remember that God is God and we are not. If God allows more people into heaven than I might expect, will I be upset? No I will rejoice in it and be glad. God sets the rules for whom he spends eternity with and if they are broader than the ones I've been taught and those I believe, I will not complain. Is God big enough to love and to forgive those I cannot. That's the question you should ask yourself. Can you think back to the people who have hurt you in your life? Especially the ones that you haven't been able to forgive. Is God big enough for that? Is God big enough to fill heaven with non-Christians? For a lot of Christians, is God big enough to fill heaven with liberal Christians? Scary bunch that they are? Is God big enough to fill heaven with atheists? Are there enough rooms in heaven for everyone as Jesus promised? As the cartoon astutely reminded us, the way to figure out the answer to that question is to go to the life of Jesus. Did he exclude, restrict or reject anyone? The fascinating part about the life of Jesus is we have one story after another of him talking to, meeting, healing of the people he should not have had contact with. With his religion and social status those were people he shouldn't have been dealing with. Jesus even treated Pilot with respect. When you think about the dialogue between them before the crucifixion... Even Pilot got Jesus' respect, even thieves on either side of him being executed... got his kindness. So I leave the last word to bill Haley, "God is God and we are not, thank goodness." **AMEN**