

In My Father's House

August 31, 2014

Matthew 16: 21-28

21 From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. 22 And Peter took him and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you." 23 But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men." 24 Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. 25 For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. 26 For what will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life? Or what shall a man give in return for his life? 27 For the Son of man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay every man for what he has done. 28 Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom."

Pray with me: O' Lord, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be understood and help them to foster a better understanding of who we are called to be in you. Amen.

Heaven is for real. Not just a popular title of a recent book and movie. When posed as a question this phrase 'Heaven is for real' can be one many of us ask ourselves in light of difficult news. News such as when we hear of or experience the death of a loved one. Upon such news we often receive the comforting words from others that she must be resting with the Angels and is looking down on us from Heaven with a smile on his face. This is one of the many perceptions of heaven and its reality but the overarching understanding is that Heaven is where good Christians go to be with God when they die.

There is nothing wrong with this definition. But it is important to unpack and understand the systematic framework of our faith. To put it another way, we have to know the foundation in order to build upon it. How we understand heaven is a part of our eschatological understanding of the end times. The concept of an afterlife at all and by afterlife I mean a life after death is something we have to accept in order to be followers of Christ. We as part of our Christian belief have faith in eternal life through the Grace of God by our belief in Jesus Christ. This eternal life can mean different things to different people.

Let me tell you this story: A man dies and goes to heaven. Of course, St. Peter meets him at the pearly gates. St. Peter says, "Here's how it works. You need 100 points to make it into heaven. You tell me all the good things you've done, and I give you a certain number of points for each item, depending on how good it was. When you reach 100 points, you get in."

"Okay," the man says, "I was married to the same woman for 50 years and never cheated on her, even in my heart."

"That's wonderful," says St. Peter, "that's worth three points!"

"Three points?" he says. "Well, I attended church all my life and supported its ministry with my tithe and service."

"Terrific!" says St. Peter, "that's certainly worth a point."

"One point? Golly. How about this: I started a soup kitchen in my city and worked in a shelter for homeless veterans."

"Fantastic, that's good for two more points," he says.

"TWO POINTS!!!" the man cries, "At this rate the only way I get into heaven is by the grace of God!"

"Come on in!"

Now while this is a funny story and all it is a fairly loose interpretation of Peter as the holder of the keys to the kingdom that we heard a little bit about last week when we read Matthew 16: 18 and it has been passed down through the ages as the way into heaven. The pearly gates refer to a passage in Revelation 21:21 where a description is found of twelve gates of pearl. Over the years the varying pieces and understanding of the afterlife, our eternal lives have combined together into human descriptions and terms.

The new testament remember is a collection of four biographies, the Gospels, and letters and instructions for how to live in this new way as a follower of Jesus Christ. All of it is essentially instructions for how we have eternal life with God even after leaving this earthly life behind. We are familiar with the image of Jesus going to prepare a place for us in his Father's house. We have the vision of many rooms and the human understanding of many rooms is a mansion and of course this eternal life must surpass even our best here on earth so we outside of the Pearly gate image have streets paved in gold and beautiful things everywhere, we have the idyllic fantasy, everything we could possibly want or imagine that is good is in Heaven.

But first in order to meet Jesus in his Father's house we have to further understand our scripture from today. We have to understand what will let us into those pearly gates and what makes it all worth it to get into heaven. You see today's scripture sets a precedence for good works getting us into heaven over grace. The Church divided on this issue, it is where we as Protestants come from. Are we saved by grace or works? This is the soteriological question. Soteriology is the theological term that explores and studies our salvation. Soteria being the Greek word for salvation. This question and understanding tie in closely with our understanding of eschatology, the end times.

Simply put is it grace or works that get us into heaven? Martin Luther famously broke away from the Catholic Church which at the time was the only church by believing it is by grace we have been saved not by works and thus the Protestants were born. Both understandings have a deeper history but we today have to see where our faith has come from as we primarily believe we have been saved by the Grace of God, that no matter what we have been done if we confess our faith in God we can be saved. This confession does not absolve us however of our actions but rather calls us to act more and more like Christ by and through our works that come out of our relationship with God.

But our scripture today clearly asks us to take up the cross and follow Jesus and asks us in verse 26 "what will they give in return for their life?" and in verse 27 we are guaranteed "repayment for what has been done."

Lets look at verse 26 "what will they give in return for their life?" This is a singularly difficult question to look at and calls us to very much weigh and measure how much the grace of God means to us in terms of our lives. I mean how much value do we place in our salvation? Is it precious as a gift or just accepted as our due?

Consider it another way, most of us come to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior of our lives in our early adolescence. In the church we consider it a rite of passage for when we step forward and make our confessions of faith and most often are also baptized. As children and youth though we put greater value on moments that occur in our lives and as we enter into adulthood those moment ultimately lose some of their significance or we struggle to regain that feeling we recall and remember that went along with that experience.

I mean I would go to my grandparents and in the summer in particular my Grandma always had fudge pops in the freezer. They were the best, I mean nothing was better than biting into an ice cold fudge pop. Well, they went off the market for a while or I just did not buy them in light of other things and one day I saw them and just had to have one. I opened up that double package and bit into it preparing myself to walk down memory lane and I promptly gagged and spit it out because it was gross.

My nostalgic memory overwhelmed my reality. Sometimes I believe this is what happens to us in our faith lives. In the church we talk of the good old days, well those good old days are in reality long and also only exist in our memory. And in our faith lives we sometimes strive for those overwhelming experiential moments when we feel the presence of God and it is just there. What do we do the rest of the time or when we are no longer in the same experience? Do we dwell on what was or do we live in what is? Let me say that again do we in our faithful living dwell on what was or do we live in what is?

You see whether we are saved by Grace or works is only part of the equation of faith. Our systematic theology, how our faith works together in all its parts and makes sense, asks us to delve deeper and not just stop there because ultimately we do end up at some gateway into our afterlife perception. Whether it is Peter with his check list looking for our 100 points or we just have the fast pass because we carry the Cross of Jesus. We are asked to give of ourselves in return for our life. We are asked to live faithfully taking up the Cross of Jesus and we are asked to embody Christ in the here and now. Amen.