

A SERMON FROM SAINT FRANCIS

REALIZING THE GLORY

A sermon preached by Mr. Josiah Rengers, Seminarian, the fifth Sunday of Easter, May 2, 2010 at Saint Francis Episcopal Church, Potomac, Maryland. Based on Revelation 21: 1 – 6 and the Gospel according to John 13: 31 – 35.

Mark Twain wrote, “Go to heaven for the climate, hell for the company.” There is a certain fascination with images of heaven and hell. It is not new. Dante wrote *The Divine Comedy* in the Middle Ages describing the inner circles of hell in every ghoulish detail and the inner sanctum of heaven with every glorious, flowery flourish. Today movies come out every year or two with a new version of the apocalypse and angel figurines fill Hallmark stores across the nation.

Perhaps we remain fascinated because heaven and hell seem so unknowable. The great irony is that the one book of the bible explicitly trying to reveal a vision of heaven is often considered the most obscure. The book of Revelation is meant to be a window into the future glories of heaven.

I admit that Revelation contains much metaphorical imagery that is sometimes difficult to work through, but not today’s reading. It is one of the clearest, most straightforward scenes. It is a revealing of heaven — of what will be. This is the final scene. Christ has returned and destroyed evil and death forever. There is a new heaven and a new earth.

Note that the world does not return to the Garden of Eden. It is not a restoration of the ideal world, but a complete transformation beyond imagining. It is a new creation. There is no sin, no death, no tears or fears. Most glorious of all, God is present among the people.

All stand in the glory of God in worship and praise. This is a magnificent, triumphant vision. This is the vision foretold throughout the Old Testament by prophets like Ezekiel and Isaiah. It is not billowy clouds or angels playing the harp. It is not endless buffets and the perfect golf course. This is the eternal promise of Christ: that we will join him in everlasting communion with God the Almighty.

At this point in the Easter season we know Christ has already begun this work of a new creation. Christ defeat-

ed death with his own death and resurrection. That was it, the battle is won and Christ wins. Because of Christ’s victory we are able to participate in the resurrected life. We are already on the road towards this vision of heaven, but we are not quite there yet.

There is still suffering, there is still pain in the world. God does not walk among His people (at least in a physical sense). Christ breaks into this new creation of heaven, but it is not yet fully realized on earth. So that leaves us with a burning question: what do we do in the mean time? What are we supposed to do while we wait for this new heaven and new earth?

For this answer we turn to the good book. The Bible has lots of advice of how to live and how to wait. Today’s Gospel offers some wisdom. Christ gives the disciples and us a new commandment, “Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other.”

This is simple, right? Unfortunately, the love of Christ turns out to be incredible. There are libraries full of very thick books on the love of Christ. We know that the cost of discipleship is great and vast. We know that there is a cross we must carry to follow Christ’s teaching. We know that we must love our neighbor, turn the other cheek, reach out to the poor, widowed and orphaned.

This is all a bit daunting for an 8 o’clock service. So for us this morning the real question is: how do we little by little, step by step begin to emulate the love of Christ in our every day, mundane life?

I offer a small, simple story. There is a mentally challenged man that works at the seminary. He cleans the dishes and works hard. He is probably the longest working employee of the seminary having been there for over thirty years. He is socially awkward. For convenience most people avoid him. There are students who go out of their way to say hi or chat, but there is one guy, a buddy of mine, who really listens. They meet every Monday

to pray and often, probably once a semester, they go out for pizza or ice cream. This is the love of Christ. A person who is mostly overlooked and forgotten is not only loved, he is respected and honored. It is not an incredible feat. It is simple. It's ice cream on a warm day. It's something most of us would gladly do for any family member or friend.

Compare this story with the story of Mother Teresa. Mother Teresa led and opened hospitals, clinics and nunneries around the world. She achieved many great things, but at the very heart of her entire ministry was a series of simple loving gestures that anyone in this room would offer to their own child. She started in 1950 with a group of thirteen women in Calcutta. Their mission was, in her own words, "Caring for the hungry, the naked, the homeless, the crippled, the blind, the lepers, all those people who feel unwanted, unloved, uncared for throughout society, people that have become a burden to the society and are shunned by everyone."

This small group of women began walking down the streets where they lived offering love to the unlovely. They saw men and women dying in the streets and would bring them inside to offer dignity at death. They would rid the person of lice and bugs; they would bathe them and dress them in clean clothes. It wasn't huge, it wasn't flashy and it sure as heck was not always pretty. This love was the love of Christ. By the time Mother

Teresa died the Missionaries of Charity had 4,000 nuns operating 610 missions in 123 countries.

Is my friend at seminary really any different from Mother Teresa? In size and recognition yes, but not in content. Not in action.

It is the utter simplicity of Christ's command, which makes it so complicated. This is why Jesus calls us to have faith like children and calls out in Matthew 12, "O Father, thank you for hiding these things from those who think themselves wise and clever and for revealing them to the childlike."

What Mother Teresa offered was a simple, childlike love. My friend offers the same. Christ's love is about self-sacrifice, it is about the cross, but it is also about the every day simple actions of loving those who surround us. By our own simple actions of love that seem small and mundane we make Christ present today. If Heaven is to be fully in the presence of Christ, then by simply loving those we pass in work, at the store or in the streets actually works towards the new creation of a new heaven and a new earth.

Christ has already broken into the kingdom with his resurrection, and He shows us how to live towards the kingdom of God by loving our brothers and sisters. By practicing and participating in this love, no matter how minutely, we push towards the final realization when all stand in the presence of God. This love is close at hand, it is written on your lips and on your hearts. Now we must go and share it. Amen.