

Acts 7: 55-60
Psalm 31: 1-5
1 Peter 2: 2-10
John 14: 1-14

Sermon for May 10, 2020

A PLACE FOR US

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: Let a thousand flowers bloom in Christ's Kingdom.

The gospel selection from John for today is one of the most beautiful and compelling in all of scripture.

There are no complicated words or images involved. *Don't let your hearts be troubled; as you believe in God, believe also in me.* There's nothing difficult there, in the ordinary sense of difficulty. *I am the way and the truth and the life:* these are all everyday words of one syllable. What could be simpler than that?

And yet...and yet...in reading these words, we feel we are being communicated with at a level much deeper than speech or thought. It radiates that strange and marvelous quality of the greatest poetry, of being both mysterious and yet profound. It's like the words are the surface of an unfathomable ocean, the depths of which we could spend our lives exploring.

What rose off the page for me in reading the passage for today was the second verse:

In my father's house, there are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.

The Greek word translated 'mansions' here in fact just means 'dwelling places.' Jesus was certainly not saying that heaven is full of Hollywood celebrity-style houses; only that there is a great variety of places to live there.

And the reason that verse struck me, I suspect, is because I had recently also read that passage in the book of Revelation, where the author in a vision of heaven describes it as having gates made of pearls and streets made of gold. As I read that, I thought, that doesn't sound like anywhere I'd want to live.

The closest I ever came to living somewhere like that was many years ago when I was visiting very well-to-do acquaintances who lived on the island of Curacao, which is just off the coast of Venezuela. They did indeed live in a very big house surrounded by a high wall with a gate made of gleaming exotic wood, and the grounds inside the walls, if not paved with gold, were still immaculately tended and filled with all sorts of expensive fountains and statuary.

It was very posh, with maids and groundskeepers and exotic food...but the whole time I was there, I felt extremely out-of-sorts. Sometimes I felt awkward and crude, sometimes indignant at the way the housekeeper was treated, sometimes morally repulsed by the ostentatious excess of it all. I don't think I had a single completely relaxed and peaceful moment the many days I was there, surrounded by all the luxury the world has to offer.

So in reading the passage for today, and how Jesus assures us that heaven has many dwelling places, I asked myself where, out of the fair number of places I've lived, where I felt most comfortable, most at peace. And after I'd thought about it for awhile, the place that stuck at the top of my mind was very, very surprising at least to me.

And at that point, it occurred to me to send out an email to the congregation, and ask you all to think about the house or place that occupied a similar place in your lives, your favorite place, the one that stands out in memory, and to describe what it was about *that* place that made it special.

Your response was really much more than I could have hoped for, and I thank you all very much.

Without revealing any personal information, what I'm going to do now is share with you some of the incredible variety that appeared in your own responses of what made that one place special.

Someone spoke of that place primarily in terms of healing, of finding a place where the emotional discomfort and sense of being an outsider were suddenly dissolved. I don't know if any of you have ever been required to wear uncomfortable shoes for a while, but if you have, you know what a relief it is to finally find shoes that fit. The pinched toes and scraped heels finally have an opportunity to heal. Those are the kind of terms this person used to describe her favorite place. And surely that's at least part of the image that Paul uses on several occasions, the image of putting on Christ, like putting on new clothes (e.g. Galatians 3: 27).

And doesn't that make perfect sense of the many dwelling places Christ is preparing for us. One size doesn't fit all. One size, and only one, will be just right. And that will be a place where we can heal.

A couple of you described your favorite place in terms of energy. It was a place of exhilarating activity, sometimes humorous, sometimes raucous, sometimes even a little dangerous, but always life at its most energetic. The great sense that came through to me from these responses was that the exuberance of life is a vital part, for some people at some times of life, clearly the most important part, the part they remember years later when describing their favorite place and time.

And isn't that acknowledged by Christ himself, when he told his followers that he had come that they might have life, and have it more abundantly. He wasn't talking about a longer life here, he was talking about a fuller, more vibrant life, a life that explores and experiments and exults in its own dynamic expenditure. It's the life of children diving from ropes into mountain lakes and swinging from rafters and studying sunflowers as if there were nothing more important in the world to do. It's a world of innocent and focused enjoyment, of carefree rambling, of endless energy. Life more abundant!

And someone else spoke quite poignantly of her favorite place as being one of acceptance, a place where we are affirmed for what we are now rather than judged for what we may once have been.

And surely no better guarantee of heaven's acceptance in almost exactly those terms can be found in St. Paul's own affirmation to the Galatians:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. (3: 28)

For those of us who have never experienced discrimination or social shunning, its absence in God's kingdom won't even be noticeable. But to those of us who have, heaven, once we get there, may very well remind us of the favorite place we ever lived.

What really struck me about the way someone else described the favorite place she'd ever lived was that she spoke of it in terms of its being both the fulfillment of a vision and a product of her own labor. The vision was one of a place of peace and beauty that could be shared with others, and the labor was work that seemed in some sense to be under the guidance of God's own supervision.

And isn't that same generosity of spirit what we find in Christ's admonition:
Love one another, as I have loved you?

And isn't that the same sense of divine guidance, and the same assurance that our labor, guided by that spirit, will always receive divine support when Christ tells us:

Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

Christ never promises us a life of endless ease and relaxation. What he does promise is a life of endless gratification and accomplishment, provided it is lived under his guidance and in his own spirit. And so surely, that's what we can look forward to in heaven as well.

And someone else wrote of her favorite place in terms of what I might describe as elevation. It was a place of few luxuries but of endless opportunity, provided you lived up to the challenges.

Christ tells his followers the same thing, that he is not offering them luxuries, but instead the opportunity to grow. There is an old saying among mountain climbers, that the path never gets less steep, it just seems so because you're getting stronger. That was the message I got as well from this response, that this one special place had been where she began to learn her own strength, and began to exercise it as she laid a firm foundation for the rest of her life.

And heaven must also be like that, don't you think. A place of ever higher and higher elevation, placed before us as we grow ever and ever stronger, a place of constant growth, of constant discovery, of constant new achievement.

And last, one of you wrote about a place of new beginnings. What set this place apart for her from all the others was that it was here that she found refuge, a time to recover, and the opportunity to begin again.

And in that single experience, can't we in essence find the whole gospel of Christ? Refuge, recovery, a new beginning?

Doesn't the 46th Psalm tell us:

God is our refuge and our strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, even though the earth tremble, and the mountains fall into the sea?

And doesn't our Lord himself open his arms and tell us:

Come to me, all who are weary, and I will give you rest?

And Isaiah gives voice to the healing power of trusting in God when he writes:

But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not faint.

And this refuge and this recovery are all in order to provide and strengthen us for a new beginning, for a new birth. As St. Paul so beautifully puts it:

Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new. (2 Cor 5: 17)

We don't know the specifics about heaven. But we have it on Christ's own assurance that it has many rooms, and that he has gone to prepare a special room for each one of us, a room that will answer perfectly to whatever we need at that particular point in our existence, that will offer us the opportunities that will benefit us the most, that will enable us to do the most good for others as well as for ourselves.

It will be a remarkably complicated place, won't it?, to deal in merciful and gracious fashion with the remarkable diversity of those who enter into it.

And we today have begun to get a sense of that complexity. Here are things we've learned that heaven will offer only for our little congregation:

HHealth
Energy
AAcceptance
Vision
EElevation
NNew beginning.

And now look at what the first letters spell.

Exactly because it is not one-size-fits-all, Heaven will be everyone's favorite place.

And so our prayer this morning, Father, is that let our hearts rest easy in the assurance that there is a place for us, a special place, a unique and perfect place, created especially with each of us in mind, by Jesus himself, our Lord and Savior, in whose name we pray.