

Home

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“In my Father's house there are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. And I go to prepare a place for you, so that where I am, there you may be also.” – John 14:2

I once heard a nun tell a joke about teaching parochial school children about heaven. She said that one little fifth grader asked her, “Sister, will there be any Protestants in heaven?” and she replied, “Yes, dear, but they'll be near the ice machine.”

I suspect I'm not the only person who imagines Jesus' words about his Father's house to depict something like a glorified Holiday Inn. The Catholics will be on one floor, and the Methodists will be on another floor, and the hardcore believers will think they've got the place all to themselves.

And we in the UCC will be down in the main lobby, of course, extending God's extravagant welcome to all the folks who will be shocked to find themselves in God's presence with the likes of us.

Whatever else heaven will be, it will be big – really, really big. Many mansions, as the King James Version so wonderfully puts it, which provided the inspiration for the gospel song I often heard as a child, “I've got a mansion just over the hilltop.”

I'd like for us to press the pause button on our visions of heaven for just a little while this morning and consider another possibility for Jesus' words to his anxious disciples. The eschatological interpretation of John 14 – that is, that these words are about some kind of life after this life – that interpretation, that comes so readily to most of us, isn't the only way to be comforted by these words from Jesus. Jesus said that he was leaving his disciples to prepare a place for them, and it's quite possible that he was talking about a place in this world, the place that Christ prepares for all of us who will accept his invitation to follow him into a new and better life.

In fact, the more I live with the gospel, the more convinced I am that we Christians have grossly exaggerated the importance of heaven as a part of our call to follow Jesus. Historically, we Christians have made getting into heaven the whole point of accepting Jesus as our Lord and Savior – think of the appeals Billy Graham made the centerpiece of his massive revivals – but as I've said to you before, you don't need abundant life in heaven, you need it here, and that's what Jesus promised everyone who will accept his way: “I came that they may have life and have it more abundantly.” Jesus said that in John's gospel just a few chapters before today's text, and the older I get and the closer heaven seems, the less I'm interested in what comes next. I'm not especially interested, as a Christian believer or as a Christian minister, in what God has in store for me or for anybody else in the world to come. My interest, rather, is on this world, the heaven and earth of creation that Genesis speaks of, in which I believe God became human so that we, too, might become human. That's what interests me.

What contribution do I have to make, as a Christian, to the lives that must be lived in that sphere of time and space? What do I have to offer the materialists like the late Stephen Hawking, from the storehouse of Christian belief and practice? What insights, what advantages, what new perspectives can I lift up from the teachings of the Christ and the Christian church that may reduce violence, promote justice, and help us live in harmony with all of God's creation?

Those are my interests, having just spent two weeks in Europe learning more about my Reformed Christian heritage. What place has Jesus the Christ prepared for me, for the brief moment of my life here on earth, that will allow me to help prove the truth of the gospel?

“I expect to pass through this world but once,” the nineteenth-century Quaker missionary Stephen Grellet is reported to have said. “Any good, therefore, that I can do or any kindness I can show to any fellow creature, let me do it now. Let me not defer or neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again.”

Is this the place that Jesus has prepared for you? Here at Faith Church, in this moment in history? Here in Richmond Heights? Here in the school district where your child is enrolled? Here in the fields being sold for so-called development? Here in the forests being slaughtered to build more malls as our downtowns and current malls crumble into ruins? Here in the farms being swallowed up by multinational corporations? Here in the unions struggling for workers' rights? Here in our overcrowded, for-profit prisons? Here at your desk where you can write to those in power on behalf of those without money and power? Here in the shelters for pets abandoned by those who once had responsibility for them? Here in the streams made toxic by fracking and runoff? Here on the shores of a great lake befouled by sewage? Here in the clinics where all women can make their own reproductive decisions? Here in the classrooms where one teacher can change the direction of a life? Here in the libraries where facts still matter and civilization is preserved? Here in the churches where the good news gives life to the walking dead?

Where is the place, for you, in this world, that the Christ has gone before you to prepare?

Zelophehad's daughters no doubt thought they'd suffered a terrible misfortune when their father died, leaving them without any men to manage their family's business, but the Christ who is cosmic and timeless inspired them to challenge the status quo, and they changed Israelite religion and Israelite law because they simply presented to Moses a case for fair and equal treatment under the law. Being cast on their own resources, and protesting the injustice that denied them the right to use those resources, was the place the Christ had prepared for them. It wasn't the home they would have asked for, but it was the home the Christ had prepared for them.

Centuries later, in a different historical moment, a different set of Jewish leaders could not tolerate the criticisms of Stephen, one of their own, and would not change, but rather they exercised their power to stone a heretic to death, making Stephen the first Christian martyr. The place of martyrdom was the place that the Christ had prepared for Stephen, who refused to abandon the best in his own religious tradition.

And centuries after that, another Christian faced another implacable religious foe, this time the Catholic Church, and the Czech reformer Jan Hus was martyred in Constance in 1416 for espousing views that Martin Luther would take up a century later. Martyrdom at the stake was the place the Christ had gone on to prepare for poor Jan Hus, and so many like him, who dared to challenge a church that had been corrupted by wealth and power.

Just a few days ago, a group of us were standing where the reformer John Calvin had lived when he virtually ruled Geneva, when a local woman interrupted our guide to remind us – or to inform us – that Calvin, too, had blood on his hands when he allowed Michael Servetus, the Spanish theologian and humanist, to be burned at the stake in Geneva for denying the Trinity and infant baptism.

And five years ago, another group of us stood on Boston Common, the place where Mary Dyer was hanged by our Puritan forbears in 1660 simply for being a Quaker. When it comes to inflicting violence in the name of faith, there is plenty of shame to go around.

When we think of home we immediately think of a place of comfort and peace and prosperity, and thank God, for most of us for most of the time that's exactly what home is. But the story of our faith, from the Garden of Eden to the book of Revelation, is the story of the other home to which God calls people of faith. That home may be a place of risk and danger and sacrifice. And if we are to be mature in our faith, and not simply remain religious infants, we need to grow into that awareness and prepare ourselves for it. Those of you who have signed up for the Bible study on Genesis, which begins this coming Wednesday, will read of a number of people who heard God's voice calling them to a home they could not have imagined for themselves and would not have wished for themselves. Their stories are preserved in scripture not because they suffered, but rather because they answered.

As his world was collapsing around him in the fifth century, St. Augustine of the North African city of Hippo reflected on his life and what it had meant for him to go to the place the Christ had prepared for him. He wrote those reflections down in a series of books that we know as his *Confessions*, in which he wrote, among many other things, "Thou hast made us for Thyself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee."

Home, they say, is where the heart is, and Augustine told us where our hearts will truly be at rest. Welcome home.