

Heaven and Earth

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Luke 24:45 Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures,
24:46 and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the
dead on the third day,
24:47 and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations,
beginning from Jerusalem.
24:48 You are witnesses of these things.

The writer of the Gospel of Luke wrote a sequel to that book, which is also in the New Testament—the Book we call “The Acts of the Apostles.” It starts where Luke leaves off, with the disappearance of Jesus, in a way reminiscent for the readers of that time of the disappearance of Moses, and of the prophet Elijah! But the second version of the story adds a little detail that I love....listen carefully!

ACTS 1:9 When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

1:10 While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them.

1:11 They said, "Galileans, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

I love this detail—and my favorite part is when the two mysterious messengers say to Jesus’ friends: “Galileans, why do you stand looking up to heaven?” Quit looking up in the sky for Jesus, they seem to be saying—you have plenty to do right where you are—look around! You may just find him right here.

The thrust of the Jesus message, even at “Ascension”—the most heaven-bound moment of his ministry—is that we have plenty to do on earth. We are called to be witnesses to the folk around us, and invite the nations—people of every ethnicity and nationality-- to start practicing forgiveness of debts, turning from greed and self-righteousness to love and community. It reminds me of the words with which Jesus taught his friends to pray: “Thy kingdom come—on earth as it is in heaven.”

Over the long curve of church history we often make the communion table a most heavenly affair—and surely communion is full of spiritual moments! But this meal is a practical rehearsal of the reminder of Jesus to be witnesses—to live into-- as much with our actions and attitudes as with our beliefs and rituals—God’s banquet table for all of humankind. We read of so many meals the historical Jesus shared with strangers, with “sinners”—that is to say those people polite religious folk might not invite to dinner. And Jesus was constantly telling stories about weddings and other feasts with surprising guest lists.

When I was a little boy my radical Baptist grandma taught me to love an old hymn we don't sing much anymore—but we sang the chorus often before meals.... “Come and dine, the master calleth, come and dine—you may feast the Jesus table all the time. He who fed the multitude, turned the water into wine, to the hungry calleth now, come and dine.”

When we look only heavenward at the communion table, we need a voice to remind us to take a look around. Jesus of Nazareth—the one in whose name we gather-- ate with women and men, rich people and poor people. He touched folk who were considered unclean; he hung out with Roman collaborators and militant rebels. He accepted hospitality from a Samaritan woman, he practiced healing and resurrection with the children of pagans.

What does this mean for us? First off, it affects how we as a congregation practice communion. It is why communion is open in this congregation—we figure if Jesus would eat with Zaccheus or Mary Magdalene—we ought not to presume to shut any out in his name. If he would welcome street children for a blessing when his disciples wanted to turn them away, who are we to turn away any child of the most high?

In addition, the communion table is nothing less than a reminder of what it means to walk with this Jesus every day, every day of our lives—Monday through Saturday included. So we turn our heavenly gaze toward the world around us and apply the principles of an open liturgical table to the table which is our everyday lives.

As I begin my time with you as your new pastor, I am meditating a lot on what it means to be an intentional community of faith. What does it look like for you and me to start living it together in fresh new ways along with the time honored old ones? In many ways, that starts right here at the communion table—we practice this open communion, we take bits of bread in the name of Christ; we remind ourselves that we are the body of Christ, and that we drink of the cup of wine which is promise for all of humankind!

For me, there is so much that this meal symbolizes—so much heaven worth sharing on earth. For one thing, it means throwing open the doors of the church—really inviting the world in. Many of you here have experienced that kind of radical welcome from this community, this Emmanuel Friedens congregation—so what are the next steps with that? Yes it means walking in the Pride parade—yes it means offering space to the Capital Pride Singers. And it most assuredly means our active presence and support with a School of Wonder and Mystery which is one of our best points of contact with the wider community of children here in Schenectady. And what else? In the weeks and months ahead I want to invite you to wonder about that with me, and pray to God, and see where the Spirit moves us! Part of it is planning, and part of it is being wide open to God.

Now that openness is a dangerous thing. The Spirit is a dangerous influence... I just recently heard from the church I used to serve that a man named Eh K'lu Tau has received the “Faith in Action” award for that congregation given every year at a Community of Churches banquet. My memory went back immediately to 2006. Our church there had received a phone call from a pastor in Utica New York. A voice said to me, “The first Karen have arrived in Rochester.” What my friend Mark was referring to was that the first refugees from Burma had

arrived from a locked camp in Thailand—two young men. They knew little English, had no connections there—and according to Mark: “We hear from members of the community here in Utica that they have nothing to eat. You have someone in the church who speaks Burmese, don’t you?” That evening found me with two Lake Avenue members visiting with nine individuals from the Karen people, not two, including a four year old and an elderly woman in a second floor walkup. The tension was so thick you could cut it with a knife when we began to talk. Fear. One of those nine was named Eh K’lu Tau. A young man of about twenty, he spoke a little English—although we had not figured that out yet. After determining what to do about food we from the church were on the way out the door. I invited the group to come visit church. “Yes we will visit...this Sunday,” was the response.

Today hundreds of refugees from Burma consider the Lake Avenue church their community. Some remain Buddhist—there are Muslims around the edges. It is their place too. In the midst of the whirlwind has been Eh K’lu Tau, an interpreter for his day job, and working for his community without pay every free moment he has.

What led that church to open up, in addition to the great work of many people both from Burma and the US, was a readiness to share at the communion table. What was at the core was the conviction that it was Christ’s table—the church didn’t belong to us. Where other congregations have received refugees by ones and twos and sixes—as Lake Avenue had, for years by the way-- in this case a church had to decide just how much love was in them! They wanted to form relationships—and they believed that we were all one, somehow, in the hands of God, the love of Jesus Christ, and the unity of the Holy Spirit. Now, the folk from Burma would have formed a separate church if they had to—but we were one, and they preferred to be a single congregation. Because of the way they were received at Christ’s table they could use the words “OUR church.”

It isn’t just about welcome in the abstract. What this communion meal means is a readiness to love one another, as we go about the business of being a church community. We need to care about each other, pray for each other: love one another. D.T. Niles, the great Asian church leader, once said “Evangelism is witness. It is one beggar telling another beggar where to get food.”

We are all beggars looking for bread—heavenly bread and earthly bread – and we need to be willing to tell each other where to find some—as well as to be ready to receive, when we need wisdom from one another—however fragmentary, however tiny the bits and pieces we share.

How do we incorporate that kind of love and mutual care into our life together, and into the lives we share beyond this little circle? I don’t have all the answers! We need to do some soul searching, some talking together—to get real, to share some bread, to pray for each other, to know one another. God will lead us! The Spirit will blow us where it wills. Christ will show up in the midst of us, yet again. Friends, why are we looking toward heaven? Look around. Jesus is everywhere.