



November 6, 2011

Sermon by Rev. Nancy Talbot

“The Heaven I’m Not Dying to Get Into”

Readings: Revelations 21: 1-5a), John 15: 12-13

In the first sermon I ever preached in this church (5 years ago this week) I talked about a lovely little wooden cross I had purchased in the gift shop of St. Peter’s Basilica in Vatican City. It was a Franciscan cross called a Tav and since I had just been to Assisi to visit the birthplace of St. Francis, lover of animals and peace and all things simple and pure, this little cross appealed to me. But beyond that I was really drawn to the figure on the cross which when I bought it appeared to me to be a figure of Jesus with his arms outstretched almost leaping off the cross in resurrected glory.

I loved that little cross until one day when I was sitting in quiet contemplation admiring it all of the sudden I said to myself “Oh my goodness! He’s dead.” There was no escaping it; Jesus’ little head was nodded off to the side in decisive defeat. I quickly took the cross off my neck and threw it in my dresser drawer. My protestant roots had won me over. All that stuff about being an Easter people, a people of new life, I just couldn’t bring myself to walk around with a dead Jesus hanging around my neck.

That was until some time later when I came to a time in my life when I was able to reclaim my crucified Jesus and wear him again with integrity.

It happened when I was struggling yet again with the ongoing call of the Divine, of life itself, to let go. Let go of ways of being in the world that are safe and familiar and comfortable, in order to embrace a Jesus way of being in the world. Let go to embrace a way that is risky and uncertain and at times unpleasant that peace and freedom and justice and new life might be known.

It was in the midst of this struggle that I came to see Jesus hanging on the cross not as a passive victim, or as a sacrificial lamb, as one whose death God orchestrated to prove a theological point as I mentioned in my sermon about Jesus a few weeks ago, but rather as one who willingly self-empties, lays down his life for his friends, so that justice might be served and a peaceful world imagined and hope and possibility embodied and made real.

When the story of my little cross came to me in preparation for today’s service what occurred to me was the strength of my aversion to that dead Jesus. It helped me tap into the aversion that we as a culture have to death in general. It’s why I think there’s been a trend away from things like funerals with caskets over the last several years and even from having cremated remains at a memorial service. We don’t like dead bodies even if we don’t have to look at them. We don’t like being faced with death. It’s why we have so many cosmetic procedures available to us to help us look young even if we aren’t young anymore. One of the hardest things that we human beings have to come to grips with about life is that we die in fact every day we die a little bit more.

And that is probably why various religious understandings of death have created for us ways of viewing God and ways of explaining death and life after death that attempt to help us human beings get a grip on our immortality and our fears about what will become of us after we leave this world.

The earliest writings about life after death that occur in the bible are in the Hebrew Scriptures. There is a place referred to as Sheol which is located in the minds of the people, somewhere beneath the earth but it’s not really mentioned as an anticipated destination. There’s no sense that it is a place of comfort or joy or hopefulness, it’s just a place. It’s not until the second century before the Common Era that a life after death connected with honour and reward really appears in Jewish life. When it appears it comes as

a response to martyrdom, as if to say that surely those who have been killed for religious reasons are worthy of reward for their faithfulness in the next life.

In the New Testament there is no consistent teaching about life after death but in the history of the church there are definitely images of a place called heaven. There is the notion of a land flowing with milk and honey, a place where human need is transformed and human fulfillment becomes possible. There is the image of heaven as a place where there will be no sorrow, no sadness, no separation and no death, an image which grew out of another time of persecution and one which speaks to our desire to be reunited with those who have died before us. And finally there is the image of an eternal Sabbath rest which was a powerful image indeed in the days when peasants literally worked from sun up to sun down, six out of seven days a week.

What these images speak of is the yearning for wholeness, the yearning for completion and the yearning for fulfillment that we as human beings carry within us. And they are still quite popular ways of understanding or at least speaking metaphorically about what happens at the end of our life. But the concept of heaven that seems to have the greatest hold on our psyches is the notion of heaven as a place where God rewards us for our good behaviour and hell as the fiery pit into which we will be thrown if we slip up. It's mostly Matthew's Gospel we have to thank for helping us conjure up images of God's wrath and punishment visiting us at the end of our days.

Once we start believing in a God who dishes out rewards and punishments it's logical that the Christian life becomes about being good and believing in what we're told to believe in. We have to pass the "test of faith" so that when we die we get our ticket into heaven, and of course any unfairness we've experienced in this life becomes rectified when we take hold of our robe and crown.

John Spong who has published a book about eternal life tells the story about his own father's death when he was 12 years old. Growing up in a very strict church that held that the Christian life was about attending church regularly and turning away from such vices as smoking, drinking, gambling and swearing, Spong feared for his father's mortal soul. He knew his father didn't mean any of the "criteria" for heaven. It made no sense to him that people tried to comfort him by assuring him his father was in a better place. If the teachings of the church were true he knew his father didn't have a hope in hell. Maybe that's why Spong has become one of the forerunners in helping ordinary people in the pews and beyond understand that the only need to believe in this kind of a God and this kind of a heaven is a human created need.

But if we let go of the God of punishments and rewards and we let go of the idea of heaven and hell, we are left with two pretty significant questions: What does happen to us after we die and what is the purpose of the Christian life? If I am to be honest about what happens to us after we die I would have to say "I don't know" because I don't and to be perfectly frank about it I don't really care -- much. It is simply not what I want to be preoccupied about in my life.

I feel quite confident that life does in some way continue on after this life and so I can embrace many of the metaphors of our tradition. I believe this in part because I have seen and known such an abundance of love and life in this world so limited by space and time that I can't help but believe that in the unboundaried world beyond this life that love and life must continue on in some powerful and amazing way. I believe it also because the more I discover about the universe and our connection to each and every star and atom I can't help but trust that what I am made of will somehow carry on.

I believe it also because I've been at the bedside of too many people who have died not to have some sense that "something" is waiting for people as they are passing from this life into whatever is beyond this life. Apparently the last three words that Steve Jobs, founder of apple, said right before he died were "wow, wow, wow!"

So I'm not particularly worried about what comes next after we die. And that leaves me to preoccupy myself in this life with the things of this life and the things of this world, the heaven that is within and among us in the here and now, the promised land that we are called to co-create with our creator in this world. That's what I think the Christian life is about, the heaven we work together to create for one another here on earth.

I like what John Spong says about the Christian life. He says that the Christian life is a journey into the reality of God (not the super theistic God of the common understanding of Christianity, but the all-encompassing spirit God of the emerging Christian way.) He says that the role of the church therefore is to transform the world so that everybody (and I would add every created thing) has a chance to live and love and be. The more we do this, says Spong, the more we experience God.

In my mind, letting people live and love and be surely has to do with seeking justice, seeking peace, standing up for what is right and opening our hearts to one another in a radically inclusive and gracious and compassionate way, in the way that Jesus did as we would say in the Christian church.

Spong also says that the end of human life is about transcending our need for survival and being able to give our life away. I wonder if that isn't what all of life is about on some level.

Which takes us back to the self-emptying and self-giving Jesus on my little cross which is for me is a model of living that is not about losing ourselves by letting others take control of our lives, but rather a model of living that calls us to be sufficiently self-possessed that what we give of ourselves for the sake of our world is the best we have to offer without need for reward, without need to control the outcome of our giving. It's about knowing deeply the love in which we were all created and acknowledging that love in one another.

Surely the ultimate act of self-giving is when at the end of our days here on earth we choose to let go of this life and offer ourselves freely and lovingly and with great trust into and over to whatever it is that awaits us.

Spong quotes taken from: John Shelby Spong "Eternal Life: A New Vision; Beyond Religion, Beyond Theism, Beyond Heaven and Hell"; Harper Collins, 2009 and CBC Radio Tapestry Interview, Sunday November 1, 2009.