

A SERMON PREACHED ON SUNDAY, OCTOBER 21, 2018

AT BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN CHURCH, BETHANY BEACH, DE

A friend of mine wrote to me that her pastor recently received a call from the IRS...IRS: "Hello, is this the Church?" Pastor: "It is." IRS: "This is the IRS. We need to verify some tax information submitted by one of your members. Can you help us?" Pastor: "I think I can, what's your question?" IRS: "Do you know a Ted Hooligan?" Pastor: "I do." IRS: "Is he a member of your congregation?" Pastor: "Yes." "Did he donate \$10,000?" (pause) Pastor: "He will."

No. we're not at Stewardship Sunday, although every good pastor would tell you that every week is Stewardship Sunday. Yet we are once again looking at a reading on values, and how we give and who we are in the giving makes a difference in how we experience the kingdom of God and the way it is lived out through us. Once again we find the disciples discussing who shall sit in the place of honor - - the right hand - - in heaven with Jesus. Surprisingly, it is not Peter who is raising the question, but the two brothers, sons of Zebedee, named James and John. They are part of Jesus' inner circle, yet they rarely speak, if ever, other than here, so it is a surprise to hear them raising such important questions within the circle of disciples. These two disciples ask Jesus to do for them whatever they ask, and in this case it is for one of them to sit at Jesus' right hand and one at his left hand in places of glory in the world of the life eternal. What made them think that they could ask for such things? There are several reasons why they made such a request. First, they based their request on their relationship to Jesus. Matthew tells us that Salome, their mother, made the request first. Salome was Mary's sister. Thus, she was the aunt of Jesus and James and John were his first cousins. They appealed to their relationship as family. Second, they were merely claiming the promises they had been made. These men had been promised thrones, power, and position in the kingdom and they were making a claim on that promise. That may be why Jesus did not rebuke them for their request. They were asking for what would be given to them, but they did not understand Jesus' timing in the matterⁱ and how kingdom talk was to fit in with his death and resurrection.

The place they are seeking is part of a very large domain. In Jesus' day, the understanding of what constituted heaven is much different than what and how we understand it today. There were nine orders of angels: seraphim, cherubim,

and thrones; dominions, virtues, and powers; principalities, archangels, and angels. Each had a separate job, everything from protecting the altar of God to presenting the prayers of humankind. The archangels are said to be the guardian angels of nations and countries; angels, or “just plain angels” are however the ones sent to humanity for their protection. All nine groups have their place in heaven within the celestial order. They surround God and the throne upon which God sits. In the new order, Jesus is at the right hand of God, and according to later Roman Catholic tradition, Mary sits at the left hand. After the fifth century she is known as Queen of Heaven, a title confirmed by a papal encyclical of Pius XII in the 20th century. It claims that Mary is Queen of Heaven because her son, Jesus Christ, is the king of Israel and the heavenly king of the universe. Mary, God, and Jesus, along with the angels, make up the heavenly council, having taken their place from that mentioned in Psalm 82 and other portions of the Old Testament. This is the world James and John feel they are worthy to inhabit with a special place set aside for them in recognition to their closeness to Jesus and the works that they did in his name. It takes a lot of hubris to believe they are worthy, which is why it is probably mentioned, as a warning to modern-day believers who feel their entry into the kingdom is a given. In other words, do you have what it takes to get to get into heaven? We shall all see at some point, for those who believe.

Once James and John make their request, Jesus says to them “You don’t know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?” “We can,” they answered. Jesus said to them, “You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared.”

When Jesus uses the word “*cup*” he is talking about “*a life experience*”. When he uses the word “*baptism*” he is referring to being “*submerged or immersed*” in that experience. Jesus is saying, “*I am about to be immersed in an experience that you cannot imagine. Are you able to go through it too?*”

They tell him that they can. But these men do not understand what awaits Jesus. Their response reveals a complete lack of understanding concerning what Jesus is about to suffer.ⁱⁱ They think that the position of highest honor is at Jesus’ hand *as he sits on his throne*, but rather it is by his side *in his suffering and death*. They are right about one thing; they will suffer for their beliefs and for

daring to follow Jesus. All of them die a martyr's death, except John, who ends up living a horrible exile on the isle of Patmos. "These men would walk the same road that Jesus walked, but they could never endure what he was about to suffer."ⁱⁱⁱ Jesus then reminds them that positions in the kingdom would not be given out based on selfish ambition, but according to the will of a sovereign God.^{iv} In other words it is not for Jesus to say who sits or will sit where; it is up to God. A few of the candidates for the ones for whom it is prepared I mentioned before. Some expect that a special place was prepared for the apostle Paul; others believe that it is Peter, though he does have a divinely high position on earth that might preclude a place in heaven as well. Most Internet Christians opt for the Virgin Mary, as I stated earlier, based mainly on an old Davidic tradition of kings and their mothers.

When the remaining ten hear what their brother disciples had asked, they were incensed at James' and John's insensitivity, if you'll pardon the pun. Finally, Jesus calls the twelve together and gives them a lecture (one he's given before) about first and last in the kingdom, this time using servanthood imagery and speaking about the ransom God pays for Jesus' death and resurrection. For "even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve." He demonstrates this at the Last Supper in *John* when he washes the disciples' feet. But we are a now people. We want to know how Jesus fulfills this promise today, here and now, often, every day. Which is it? Is the Son of Man a creature of the moment? How does Jesus serve us? I think in order to understand this we need a new understanding of service as sacrifice; it is a giving up of our body and soul for others. Jesus was supreme in this undertaking. We may ask how we might ever match what he did. Luckily we don't have to. What Jesus did on the cross was done once and is sufficient for all time. Though others have gone to the cross as part of their devotion to God and to God's son, that sacrifice by God's grace it is not required of us. What is required is worship and prayers that give God glory for what has been undertaken on our behalf. That is why we come together weekly. The liturgy we share is a way of service, to others, to ourselves, to our community. That is why it is so essential to our lives as Christians. It is in coming together in Jesus' name so that he can serve us best, because when two or three are gathered in his name we are promised that he will be in our midst, and if in our midst then in our hearts, guiding us in godly ways.

There is just one last portion of the gospel for this morning that deserves attention and this is the theological idea that in a manner of extreme service to

humankind, Jesus was paying a “ransom” by his death and resurrection. *Wikipedia* explains it for us, and if you ask me, it is one of the more weird doctrines of Christian faith, to wit: essentially, this theory claimed that Adam and Eve sold humanity over to the Devil at the time of the Fall; hence, it required that God pay the Devil a ransom to free us from the Devil's clutches. God, however, tricked the Devil into accepting Christ's death as a ransom, for the Devil did not realize that Christ could not be held in the bonds of death. Once the Devil accepted Christ's death as a ransom, this theory concluded, justice was satisfied and God was able to free us from Satan's grip.^v The discussion and acceptance of this theory is highly debated among the Christian and non-Christian (7th day Adventist/Jehovah's Witnesses) churches, each with a diverse understanding of what “ransom” means (the Roman Catholic church calls it a mystery, for instance, states that it does not know to whom the ransom was paid or if it was paid to anyone, for that matter...).

So now you know quite a bit about this portion of the gospel, short of a course in theology. I'd like to end today with a little rich story about atonement that deserves to be heard. Written by Joshua Harris, it's called *The Room*:^{vi}

In that place between wakefulness and dreams, I found myself in a room. There were no distinguishing features in this room save the one wall covered with small index card files. They were like the ones in libraries that list titles by author or subject in alphabetical order. But these files, which stretched from floor to ceiling and seemingly endlessly in either direction, had very different headings. As I drew near the wall of files, the first to catch my attention was one that read "Girls I Have Liked". I opened it and began flipping through the cards. I quickly shut it, shocked to realize that I recognized the names written on each one.

And then without being told, I knew exactly where I was. This lifeless room with its small files was a crude catalog system for my life. Here were written the actions of my every moment, big and small, in a detail my memory couldn't match.

A sense of wonder and curiosity, coupled with horror, stirred within me as I began randomly opening files and exploring their content. Some brought joy and sweet memories; others a sense of shame and regret so intense that I would look over my shoulder to see if anyone was watching.

A file named "Friends" was next to one marked "Friends I Have Betrayed".

The titles ranged from the mundane to the outright weird. "Books I Have Read", "Lies I Have Told", "Comfort I Have Given", "Jokes I Have Laughed At". Some were almost hilarious in their exactness: "Things I've Yelled at My Brothers." Others I couldn't laugh at: "Things I Have Done in My Anger", "Things I Have Muttered Under My Breath at My Parents". I never ceased to be surprised by the contents. Often there were many more cards than I expected. Sometimes fewer than I hoped.

I was overwhelmed by the sheer volume of the life I had lived. Could it be possible that I had the time in my 20 years to write each of these thousands or even millions of cards? But each card confirmed this truth. Each was written in my own handwriting. Each signed with my signature.

When I pulled out the file marked "Songs I Have Listened To", I realized the files grew to contain their contents. The cards were packed tightly, and yet after two or three yards, I hadn't found the end of the file. I shut it, shamed, not so much by the quality of music, but more by the vast amount of time I knew that file represented.

When I came to a file marked "Lustful Thoughts", I felt a chill run through my body. I pulled the file out only an inch, not willing to test its size, and drew out a card. I shuddered at its detailed content. I felt sick to think that such a moment had been recorded.

An almost animal rage broke on me. One thought dominated my mind: "No one must ever see these cards! No one must ever see this room! I have to destroy them!" In an insane frenzy I yanked the file out. Its size didn't matter now. I had to empty it and burn the cards. But as I took it at one end and began pounding it on the floor, I could not dislodge a single card. I became desperate and pulled out a card, only to find it as strong as steel when I tried to tear it.

Defeated and utterly helpless, I returned the file to its slot. Leaning my forehead against the wall, I let out a long, self-pitying sigh. And then I saw it. The title --- "People I Have Shared the Gospel With". The handle was brighter than those around it, newer, almost unused. I pulled on its handle and a small box not more

than three inches long fell into my hands. I could count the cards it contained on one hand.

And then the tears came. I began to weep. Sobs so deep that the hurt started in my stomach and shook through me. I fell on my knees and cried. I cried out of shame, from the overwhelming shame of it all. The rows of file shelves swirled in my tear-filled eyes. No one must ever, ever know of this room. I must lock it up and hide the key.

But then as I pushed away the tears, I saw Him. No, please not Him. Not here. Oh, anyone but Jesus. I watched helplessly as He began to open the files and read the cards. I couldn't bear to watch His response. And in the moments I could bring myself to look at His face, I saw a sorrow deeper than my own. He seemed to intuitively go to the worst boxes. Why did He have to read every one?

Finally He turned and looked at me from across the room. He looked at me with pity in His eyes. But this was a pity that didn't anger me. I dropped my head, covered my face with my hands and began to cry again. He walked over and put His arm around me. He could have said so many things. But He didn't say a word. He just cried with me.

Then He got up and walked back to the wall of files. Starting at one end of the room, He took out a file and, one by one, began to sign His name over mine on each card.

"No!" I shouted rushing to Him. All I could find to say was "No, no," as I pulled the card from Him. His name shouldn't be on these cards. But there it was, written in red so rich, so dark, so alive. The name of Jesus covered mine.

It was written with His blood.

He gently took the card back. He smiled a sad smile and began to sign the cards. I don't think I'll ever understand how He did it so quickly, but the next instant it seemed I heard Him close the last file and walk back to my side. He placed His hand on my shoulder and said, "It is finished."

I stood up, and He led me out of the room. There was no lock on its door. There were still cards to be written....

May God be the Glory. Amen.

(The Rev. Dr. Rayner W.Hesse, Jr.
Pastor, BBCC

ⁱ http://sermonnotebook.org/mark/Mark%2051%20-%20Mark%2010_35-45.htm

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

^{iv} *Ibid.*

^v https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ransom_theory_of_atonement

^{vi} http://www.moroni10.com/the_room.html