

“Time to Make a Difference”

OT 23A-17—Homecoming Sunday

Romans 13: 8-14

Matthew 18: 15-20

Rev. Rob Carter

9/10/17

“Time to Make a Difference”

Who gets in and who doesn't?

Growing up, this was the primary faith question I had. Who gets into heaven, and who doesn't?

Do only Christians get into heaven? Or, is it more exclusive than that? Do you have to be *Presbyterian*? Different people told me different things, and I wasn't sure what to believe. But I reassured myself—at least for my family and me, it didn't matter. As I once told my mother as little boy, “I'm glad we're the Presbyterian.” “Why's that?” she asked. “Because we're the right religion.”

It gave me comfort to know that death isn't the end. That there's another life waiting for us after this one. I suppose it's why this question of who's in and who's out was so important to me.

But as I grew up, so did my observations, along with my questions. I began to wonder about non-Christians. Are they doomed to an eternity in damnation, as Reformed theologians like Calvin and Knox and Zwingli would all say? Do you really have to literally believe, or trust in Jesus Christ to be “saved,” as my church had taught me? Is it like a test you have to answer correctly? And if you mess it up, do you end up in hell?

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When I asked this question at an Evangelism Team meeting about 15 years ago, the woman sitting next to me quickly turned her head and said, “Well, I should say so, or what's the point of it all?”

But that was just it for me growing up—*what's the point of it all?* What's the point of faith in the first place? What's the whole point of our relationship with God? Why did God become human? Why did Jesus die? What's the point of it all?

You see, I had long thought the whole point was getting into heaven. God started a relationship with humanity and came to us in Jesus Christ and calls us to trust in him in order to get us into heaven when we die. I thought salvation in the next life was what faith is really all about.

But as I began to encounter more and more extraordinary people of other faiths... when I became good friends with some folks who were agnostic... some who were atheists... And when I began to realize just how big the world really is—that there are children growing up in places where, horrifically, they'll die before their fifth birthday and never even have the chance of hearing about God's love for them in Jesus Christ... I began to wonder all the more: is the God

of Jesus Christ—the one who says God loves all—is this God of overflowing grace really interested in sending anyone to hell?

I began to doubt it. Which then led me to wonder—is hell even real? Certainly, there are hells on earth. We’ve all tasted those. But hell in the next life? I wasn’t so sure.

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Suffice it to say, by the time I enrolled in seminary, I had lots of questions and very few answers. But the question that was still on my mind the most... the question I was most anxious to explore... was still this question from my childhood. Who gets in, and who doesn’t?

For I still thought that this question resided at the heart of it all. I still thought that getting into heaven was the main reason we endeavor this thing called faith in the first place.

But at the same time, I could no longer claim the faith of my childhood, either. I could no longer envision the God of Incarnate Love—the one who promises to always be with us—doing anything other than embracing every last soul in both life and in death.

So when I went to seminary, I was yearning... absolutely yearning to read a theologian who would tell me, “Don’t worry... your agnostic buddy is getting’ in.” And I longed to hear a seminary professor proclaim, “Even those who’ve never heard of Jesus will be blessed with salvation.” “Heaven for everybody,” so to speak.

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But I didn’t read any such writings from a theologian. And I never heard a seminary professor say anything quite like that.

Instead, for the first time in my life, frankly, I was invited on a journey of exploring and studying my questions for myself. And I actually began to take reading the Bible seriously. Which is saying something. For I’m here to tell you, I doubt many folks have ever gone to seminary more Biblically illiterate than me. I mean, I knew there were people named Moses and Abraham and Joseph in the Old Testament, but I could’ve never connected their stories, or even told you in what book you’d find them. And while I knew the story of Jesus Christ, I didn’t feel comfortable just opening up a Gospel and reading it. The Bible just seemed so arcane to me. So needlessly wordy and complicated, right?

But there I was, in a religious Master’s program no less, with no choice but to take reading Scripture seriously... and not terribly optimistic about it, to be honest.

But wonder of wonders... I discovered something. When you learn just a bit of the history behind the Bible... and when you begin to uncover a bit of how the Bible came to be... it’s actually not that hard to read at all. And the more you read it... the easier it gets... and the more the dots connect.

So there I was, for the first time in my life... beginning to feel as I could read Scripture for myself. And interpret Scripture for myself. And come to understand what I believe based not on what other people told me to believe, but on what I believed Scripture says to me.

And I’m here to tell you, it was life-giving. It was life-changing! For it helped me begin to look at the world not just from my own, limited perspective, but through the Gospel lens... through the lens of love and grace in Jesus Christ.

And that's not all. It was also then that I began, for the first time, really, sharing some earnest, honest faith conversations with friends and other students... really good conversations, some of which came out of nowhere... some of which challenged my assumptions... some of which inspired me to dig deeper... some of which scared me, quite frankly... and some of which left me in awe and wonder. But all of them... all of those conversations were, without doubt, formational for me. Deeply formational.

And why wouldn't they be. As Jesus makes clear in our gospel lesson today, when two or three are gathered in Jesus' name, exploring life through the Gospel lens, there Jesus promises to be as well.

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Now I share all this, friends, not because I think it's important for us all to go to seminary. Not. At. All.

But as I look back on my season in seminary, I see that as the first time in my life—the very first time—that I took my spiritual formation seriously. That was the first time I intentionally sought to grow closer to God, and who God was calling me to be. That was the first time I took my own faith seriously enough to let God show me where to go or what to do, rather than me always trying to fit God into my nice and neat little box of preconceived notions.

And part of what came of that formational experience for me was the realization that getting into heaven may not necessarily be the primary point of faith at all. (Now, please don't misunderstand me. I do believe in the afterlife, and I find tremendous hope and peace in the promise of salvation when we die.)

But as we read in our lesson from Romans today, salvation is not simply what happens to us when we die... but is part of life in the here and now.

As Paul puts it in his letter to the Romans, "Don't you all know what time it is? Do you not realize that salvation is at hand? That salvation is nearer to us than ever before? So wake up!" Paul says. "Don't miss the boat! Don't miss the chance to live into salvation here and now. For God is as close to you now as your very next breath! And God is inviting you to participate not only in the transformation of your own life, but in the transformation of the world!"

Granted, Paul doesn't say it like this word for word, but that's his point. "God is inviting you to participate not only in the transformation of your own life, but in the transformation of the world!"

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Transformation. Your transformation. My transformation. This community's transformation. Baltimore's transformation. The world's transformation.

That's the point of faith. Transformation from old ways built on false hopes and broken promises, into a new life built on the sure and faithful promises of God who invites us to be coworkers in the kingdom.

That's the point of it all.

But here's the thing, friends. Transformation ain't easy. I mean, just one wisp of the destruction and violence and injustice and intolerance of the day reveals this. And if we look even more deeply within ourselves, we'll see some of the hidden prejudices, some of the

misplaced priorities, some of the hidden scars and struggles we all have but so rarely try to transform.

Which is why... if we're going to seek transformation intentionally... we must invest in our own spiritual formation. If we're to grow as disciples... if we're to grow closer to God... if we're to develop a deeper appreciation of God's love for us... and if we have any intention of spreading that joyful good news of God's kingdom beyond these walls and making a last difference in the world around us... then our own spiritual formation is something we cannot ignore. It's too important. It's too life-changing. It's too life-giving.

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Now, I expect you see where I am going with this. So let me be as transparent as I can be. I am excited... so excited that Towson Presbyterian Church kicks off exactly such a program this morning, revealed in the Adult Spiritual Formation brochure you got.

Open it up, and you'll see Sunday morning offerings.

You'll see weekday and weeknight offerings.

And you'll find that some of the offerings are fairly traditional for a church, like Bible and faith studies. Some may be a bit deep, perhaps, but others are oriented very intentionally to those brand-new to spiritual formation.

And still other offerings, at first glance at least, others might seem not to really be spiritual or faithful at all. That is, until we remember what Jesus said about "where two or three are gathered" in his name, he promises to be right there, too. For while there may not be a lot of Bible study at a wine tasting group or Monday night football group (both of which I think will be spectacular small groups, by the way), community resides at the heart of them. So at every small group gathering... regardless of its focus... there will be community... and sharing... and praying... and room for conversations and relationships to grow that just might prove to be transformational for you and for others... if you but give them a taste.

For as one of my favorite authors, Diana Butler Bass has written, "Christianity did not begin with a confession. It began with an invitation into friendship, into creating a new community, into forming relationship based on love and service."

So if I may ask one thing of you this morning... just one thing... please take the brochure you were given and open it up. Give it a read. And then take out a pencil from behind the pew in front of you. And once you've read through it... take the pencil and circle one offering. Just one for now. One Sunday morning offering or one small group that you're going to taste. One spiritually formative offering you're going to commit to this fall. One potentially transformative experience that you'll let yourself experience. If you want to circle more than one, be my guest. But please... take the brochure... and circle one offering you'll attend.

And if you think I don't mean you... please re-think that, because I do.

I'll give you a minute to look through it again.

I would like to give you even more time... but I hope you found at least one offering you have circled.

Because here's the thing, Towson Presbyterian Church. I am excited. I am excited for this program *because* I am excited about the mission and ministry and potential that exist here, within you. I'm excited about the church you have been, and I'm excited about the church you

are called to be. And I am excited about the time that is upon us right here and right now. The time, as Paul said, that is filled with God's very presence. A time when salvation is nearer to us than we could imagine.

And I, for one, can't wait to see the love and the care and the difference Towson Presbyterian Church can make as we seek to be coworkers in God's kingdom! Amen.