

The Grand Sweep of Jesus

Presented by Pastor Scott Walters on 5/12/19

At Crossroads United Methodist Church

Waunakee, WI

A remember a parishioner while I served at Bashford in Madison. He was a real estate developer by trade. He told me he would make it a kind of “spiritual exercise” to sit near the capitol or State Street – or anywhere, really – to focus on people – and as they walked by Bill would internally ask himself, “Did Jesus Christ offer himself for this person?”

Bill said, when he had the time, he’d go to places like downtown Madison because of the wide variety of people – and he was a kind of a “people person” anyway. It might be a college student or a legislator, a shop keeper on State Street or a homeless person or a pan-handler. “Did Jesus Christ die for this person?”

Don’t get me wrong. It was, for Bill, a rhetorical question because he really knew the answer before he asked it. He said, “It’s my little discipline to see just how big this Jesus really is and how I have change because of him.”

One thing we know about Jesus is that he brings wholeness and faith and a salvation where it didn’t seem possible before.

He brings “new life” to persons that nobody else thought had a chance – those that are “beyond the pale.” There is a kind of relentless reach in his work among us; a kingdom that is always expanding its borders; always including more and more in its boundaries.

“A farmer goes out to sow seed and – carefully, meticulously – prepares the ground, removing all rocks and weeds, sowing one seed six inches from another? No. The farmer, without any preliminary prep-work, begins slinging the seed.”

Or... A net is hauled into the boat full of creatures “both good and bad.” Should the catch be sorted, separating the good from the bad? No. Jesus is more impressed with the size of the haul than with the quality of the harvest. One day, not today, it will all be sorted.

A field is planted with good seed. But a perverse adversary sows weeds in the same field. Should we cull the wheat from the weeds? No. Jesus says that someday he will judge the good from the bad, but we’re not to bother ourselves with that today.

It’s obvious Jesus never took “The Short Course” at the UW-Madison. The Master seems to be more interested in growing and harvesting than in separating the good from the bad or the saved from the damned.

“Which one of you,” Jesus asks, “having lost one sheep will not leave the 99 sheep to fend for themselves in the wilderness and beat the bushes until you find the one lost sheep? Which one of you will not put that sheep on your shoulders like a lost child and say to your friends, ‘Come party with me?’ Which one of you would not do that?”

“Which of you women,” Jesus continues, “if you lose a quarter will not rip up the carpet and strip the house bare and when you have found your lost coin run into the street and call to your neighbors, ‘Come party with me, I found my quarter!’ Which one of you would not do that?”

And which of you fathers, having two sons, the younger of whom leaves home, blows all his money, comes dragging back home in rags, will not throw the biggest bash this town has ever seen singing, “This son of mine was dead but is now alive!” Which one of you would not do that?

And which of you, journeying down County Q, upon seeing a perfect stranger injured on the side of the road, injured, would not risk your life and put the injured man in the backseat of your car; take him to the hospital, spend every dime you have on his recovery, and more? Which one of you would not do

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that?

The answer is that none of us would act in these ways. These are not stories about us. They are God's stories – God the searching shepherd; God the careless farmer; the indiscriminate fisher, the reckless woman, the indulgent father, the extravagant Samaritan.

Jesus reveals a God whose nature is extravagance. So when Jesus, confronted by the hunger of the multitudes, took what his disciples had and blessed it, there was not only enough to satisfy the hungry ones, there was also a surplus, more than enough. Jesus demonstrates a generosity that is at the heart of all God-given reality.

Here is a small sect in a far corner of the Empire, centered upon devotion to a certain Jew; a criminal who was tortured to death by the authorities, a little group holding on by their fingernails. They had managed to establish a few pitiful congregations here and there in the hinterland.

Though Jesus had once called them the “light of the world,” their light seemed fragile and dim; no real competitor with the Caesars of the world. Yet when they spoke about “new Life” and “saving love,” they told of an event to less world-shattering than the end and the beginning of all things. They felt compelled to offer this hope – this salvation – to the ends of the earth, to invite disciples from all nations. ALL NATIONS!

Previously they had made careful, religious distinctions between Gentile and Jew, male and female; now they claimed all such distinctions were destroyed in the inclusive embrace of Christ.

Today's lesson from the Revelation to John is a vision of that time when God shall get what God wants. Did you notice something about this passage?

John – exiled on the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea – says that heaven contains “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes, and peoples, and languages.”

Imagine that huge, numberless throng. They are all before the throne of the Lamb; all worshipping the Lamb. John in this vision in the Book of Revelation is suggesting that heaven is a place, with lots of room for many different kinds of people from many different places.

Dear friends, heaven is the result of the searching shepherd; the seeking woman; the reckless farmer. Heaven is a great multitude, a limitless throng, a crowd. And because of what Jesus offers you and me, this is our destiny, our last and our best hope. Amen.