

As I Have Loved You

April 28, 2013

Revelation 21:1-6 John 13:31-35

Revelation 21:1-6

^{21:1} Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. ² I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴ ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

⁵ He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

⁶ He said to me: “It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life.

John 13:31-35 (NIV)

³¹ When he was gone, Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man is glorified and God is glorified in him. ³² If God is glorified in him, God will glorify the Son in himself, and will glorify him at once.

³³ “My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come.

³⁴ “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

In the passage from Revelation this morning we have a vision of that glorious time when there will be no more death, mourning or crying because the One who is seated on the throne is making everything new – the old order of things has passed away.

It is a vision of the ‘already not yet’ reality that the work of Jesus already completed on the cross, still continues in the ongoing transformation of the world.

We yearn for the fulfillment of the vision – no death or mourning or crying. We know that in Christ death is defeated, yet we also know that in this still imperfect world; that a nine year old boy eating an ice cream cone can be cut down by a crock pot bomb, and his mother and sister disabled. We know that children who we expect to be safe at school can be taken from the land of the living in a matter of moments.

Violence seems to be on the rise all around us. Increasing challenges with a broad variety of health issues seem to assault us on every side. Aging infrastructures make safety less certain and deteriorating ethics erodes our hope for a better future. It seems the vision is still distant, far off, and even seems to be getting farther...

The people of God have faced challenges throughout history, imprisonments, persecutions, famines, yet they have not lost hope. Oh, hope has been challenged, it has been smothered to a smoldering ember or a dim flicker, but it has never completely died. In the midst of such challenges it becomes understandable that we tend to look toward 'home in heaven' as our goal. But Jesus is Lord of lords, and King of kings, not just in the future, but now.

So, rather than my natural inclination of focusing on the signs of the not yet fulfilled kingdom, I need to focus on the indications of the kingdom being fulfilled; of God's people loving as Christ loved.

Last Thursday was World Malaria day. Malaria, a preventable disease, ravages Africa with nearly 2,000 deaths per day, the majority of them children. That is a staggering number to me. My mind cannot quite grasp that for each of us here, at least ten people will die today, and tomorrow, and the day after... each day this week, and this month, and this year, from malaria. It brings tears to my eyes, mourning to my soul.

However, six years ago it would have been twenty people for each of us... The good news is that because of Christian efforts to protect and educate, the death rate has been cut almost in half from six years ago. The United Methodist 'Imagine No Malaria' team have been key leaders in the effort, including a member of First UMC in Lakeland. The goal to eradicate malaria is being realized and the tears of mourning are being wiped away. John's vision is coming – already here but not yet complete...

If those numbers are staggering to you, as they were to me, the leading cause of death, of tears and mourning in the world today is hunger. Today the earth produces approximately 4 and a half pounds of food per person each day. That is plenty of food to go around, but distribution of food to places of dire need is still a problem.

While hunger in the US is real, it is rarely fatal because we have adequate resources, distribution and social support to care for basic needs of our citizens. Outside the US however, 25,000 people die daily from hunger related causes. Two hundred and fifty people for each one of us will die today, and each day this week, and this month, and this year. I trust it grieves your soul as it does mine that people precious to God are starving while you and I have plenty.

Eight years ago United Methodist Ray Buchanan founded the organization 'Stop Hunger Now' with a mission to stamp out world hunger in our lifetime. The idea is to pack dehydrated, high protein meals that can stand the test of travel and send them to developing countries around the world. Stop Hunger Now has packaged almost 96 million meals, at a cost of just 25 cents each. That's not a gourmet meal, but a for just one dollar you and I can provide four live saving, nourishing, vitamin enriched meals.

Florida United Methodists are joining the campaign, with plans to package a million meals this year. That' will be a million more reasons for tears to be dried, for mourning to turn to joy, for despair to turn to hope, for the love of Christ to be experienced in a simple, life preserving meal.

After washing the feet of his disciples, including Judas who would betray him, Jesus said "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

Did he mean everyone will know we are his because of our love for our fellow Christians, or our fellow congregational members? I don't think so. If we remember He taught that just as importantly as loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, we should love our neighbors as ourselves. 'But,' he was asked 'who is my neighbor?' And Jesus told the story of the mugged and beaten Jewish traveler who was ignored by his own people, but was cared for by a Samaritan, someone of another faith.

Gail received an email yesterday rhetorically posing the question whether someone could be a good Muslim and a good American... to which the email point by point said "No, no, no." But the question that email raised for me was whether I myself could be a good Christian and a good American. The author stated that a Muslim's first allegiance was to God, not the nation and that we should be suspicious of all Muslims.

Hmm... it seems a Christian's first allegiance should also be to God. Christians were once persons of suspicion, and in some countries still are. For many years there has been an ongoing discussion and debate whether a national flag should even be displayed in any Christian church, American or not. Jesus taught that we cannot serve two masters, and the flag of our nation presents me with a constant reminder of my divided loyalty.

There are definitely differences in the Muslim, Jewish, and Christian understanding of God, yet we are all in fundamental agreement that there is only one God to whom we owe our highest loyalty. And if we honestly examine our Christian history we recognize that a mere 700 years ago we find murderous violence of Protestant versus Catholic, and Christian versus Jew, Christian

versus non-Christian... even protestant versus protestant. We cannot honestly claim we are historically any less bloody than other faith traditions.

I, perhaps you too, need to be on guard against the very real and natural elitism of my preferences for people of our Christian faith, even of our denomination, or our American nationality, or our Caucasian race, or our social or educational status. I am reminded by Scripture that we ourselves are grafted in – all of us here are non-Jewish Gentiles, once excluded, but now included in God's people, by the all-inclusive sacrifice of Jesus Christ on behalf of sinners everywhere and through all time. Our tears are dried, our mourning ending, for death has been defeated. And we are emissaries to offer that same hope to all who will receive.

We cannot be faithful to God and define the inclusionary circle to be smaller than what God established in Jesus Christ; the salvation, the redemption of all humanity, of all sinners. In us, and through us, God is wiping away the tears of those in bondage to sin, of those who have no hope, of those enslaved to a concept of salvation by works fearful that all their good deeds may be lost in one mis-step.

Yes, some day we will cross the river to that land where there is no more sorrow, death, tears, or mourning, where we will be with Christ in Beulah land – married to the One who bought our redemption with his own blood. But while we dwell on this side, we will be known as followers of Christ by our willingness to show Christ's love through our own love for those we identify as our enemies, and in our sacrifice for the least and most helpless of human kind.