

May 10, 2020: IN MY FATHER'S HOUSE JOHN 14

As a youth in confirmation class (which lasted 3 years), the same questions we wrestled with then, still continue to haunt me now. John 14 suggests that "whatever we ask for in the name of Jesus will be granted." As we explore what Jesus meant by this, the mystery becomes more elusive. Tom Sawyer prayed for a new fishing pole three times, based on this passage, and did not receive his request. From that point of theological disappointment, Tom never prayed again! A mature understanding of the Gospel reveals that our Lord probably was not describing a slot machine handle called God. Any of us who pray realizes that sometimes we get what we want and sometimes we don't.

The well-meaning Pastor Johnson, who taught the confirmation class, tried to explain about praying with the right amount of faith. "So, we don't get our wish from God without the right amount of faith?" I asked. Then, Pastor went on to say that we need to ask, "in His name or if it be thy will." This frustrated me to no end. I admit to being pretty rude and disrespectful by saying: "Sounds like Christians are exuding a bunch of double talk! If you get what you want, praise God and halleluiah---if your request is denied---it's your fault for not praying properly or not having enough faith.

My best friend Kevin was Roman Catholic. I was Lutheran. Both our grandmothers went into the hospital for open-heart surgery in a time when only 50% of patients survived. My grandmother lived and Kevin's grandmother died. Each grandmother had hundreds of people praying for recovery. This confused me even more. Did the Lord save my grandmother because she was Lutheran? Or did she have the requisite amount of folks praying on her behalf? Harvard Medical School studies have been conducted showing that patients who are prayed for do have a more positive, measurable outcome. As much as we want to put our Lord and His teaching under a microscope or cram Him into a test tube, somehow, He just will not fit! I have not stopped praying but when I pray these days it is all about changing me. No longer do I seek for God to give me material blessings. It is enough to know that the Lord loves me more than I love myself. Much peace comes from realizing I am in His presence. Whether I am in "the dark night of the soul or the cloud of unknowing," the knowledge and the feeling that I am in the presence of "the Abba Father" is enough. It is MORE than enough. We can experience this peace which conquers fear and anxiety. That's why I pray. Whenever I pray, I pray for spiritual blessings like forgiveness, wisdom, patience or strength to "participate joyfully in the suffering of this world." My head is filled with scripture which always kicks in during times of prayer. I believe that the 9 spiritual attributes in Galatians 5:22 are guaranteed to be answered in the affirmative. These blessings are not of this world! They are Kingdom prayers which the Lord will always grant us. C.S. Lewis would write that "I do not pray to change the Lord's mind or to give me things---I pray that Jesus the Christ changes me."

For some reason the church uses the words of Christ to exclude people from the kingdom. Every small group or class that I have ever taught involves people wanting to know who is going to heaven and who is not. My attempt to be humorous and deflate

this potential controversy would be to say: “we are in sales and not management.” We often twist the exclusive claims of Jesus the Christ upon our lives to use as a weapon against people whose doctrine and belief structure is not like our own. Karl Barth was asked by Princeton Seminary students: “Can people find God and go to heaven if their religion is Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish or Hindu?” Professor Barth would reply---“No God has not revealed himself in any religion, including Christianity, He has revealed Himself in His Son.” We often turn this revelation into our denominational understanding about what we must believe in order to be saved and get to heaven after we die. Perhaps God in Christ is with us in heaven right now when we are in His presence. I have talked to Christians who actually feel like their congregation or their denomination is “the only way.”

Albert Schweitzer tried to find the “Historical Jesus”, and even wrote a book describing his Biblical and theological journey. The end product of his ruminations revealed that finding the historical Jesus was impossible. He could, however, study for an M.D. and bring western medicine to the Congo. He seems to be telling us that throwing a name around or believing the right stuff or talking about who goes to heaven is less important than “being Jesus” and doing “even greater things than He (Jesus).” It seems that Christendom these days is divided by this litmus test. Either we believe that Dr. Schweitzer is burning in hell because he did not preach and proclaim. Or we might believe that Dr. Schweitzer was living in heaven his whole life as he healed more people than Jesus. Of course, in truth, none of us on earth really knows. Whatever happened to “judge not” and the Lord’s garden admonition not to eat from the tree which gives us a judgment belonging only to God? Barbara Lundblad gives us something to ponder: “Those of us who are part of the church know we are not what Jesus called us to be. We spend too much and share too little; we judge too many and love too few, we wait too long and act too late. Perhaps we are saying, show me a church where ministers aren’t self-serving, where hypocrisy has been purged away; where church members don’t waste time and energy squabbling over petty details, where love is genuine, and I’ll become a member. You’ll wait a long time my friend, for such a church takes up no space on the earth. It has floated up, up and disappeared beyond Oz or perhaps such a church lives as a memory of a time when disciples believed, when faith could move mountains and motives were pure.” Karl Barth quoted earlier, after writing 26 volumes on Christian Theology was asked at a press conference to “pot boil” all his writings in a single sentence. This is what he said: “Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so” Perhaps if we knew about that love in our hearts and actually practiced being Christ instead of judging, the Kingdom might actually come.

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