

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Jesus at the Gate, not Peter"
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Christ the King Sunday

So this guy dies and goes to the pearly gates where he lines up with everybody else. Unlike everybody else, he has two large suitcases. No one else has even one small suitcase or bag. Eventually he gets his turn at the front of the line where Peter tells him that his name is in the book but he also says, "You can't come in with those suitcases. No baggage allowed." And he points to a sign on the wall to that effect.

"Well," he says, "I was told I would be able to take these suitcases and their contents to heaven with me. Perhaps you should call the Boss and ask him what the situation is." "Very well," says Peter, "I will call him right now." So Peter goes over to the phone on the wall, picks up the receiver, and begins speaking to the King. "Yes, your majesty, of course, your majesty, yes, sir, right away, sir." Peter comes back to the counter where the man is still waiting with his two large suitcases.

"You're right. The King says that you are more than welcome to come in and to bring your two suitcases with their contents. Enter through that door, please." And the man takes his bags and goes through the door, with quite a large smile on his face.

The next guy in line is absolutely perplexed. He asks Peter, "What was that all about?" Peter answers, "Oh, that fellow had two bags full of gold bars in them. For some reason, the Lord felt he should let him in with all the gold." The guy says, "Why on earth would the Lord let that fellow into heaven with two large suitcases full of gold bars?" Peter responds, "Oh, I guess the street workers were running short of paving materials." "Next in line, please."

And with that, you have what I call theologizing by telling jokes. "Theologizing" simply means teaching or reflecting on God. This joke is meant to tell you that what we highly value here, millions of dollars in gold, is just common and ordinary stone in heaven. Don't set your heart on what doesn't last, as Jesus taught, rather work for that which lasts forever.

Of course, the joke also teaches that heaven will be like a busy airport with long queues or line-ups, but no baggage. It also teaches us that Peter is at

the gate, letting people into heaven. But we know that heaven will be a city, unlike any we have ever known, unlikely to be like a busy airport, rather a wondrous place with precious, semi-precious stones and metals that can house the complete numbers of humanity, if so needed. The physics of that place will mean that Jesus will be able to meet with all of us simultaneously and spend as much time with us as we need, unlike his earthly ministry. We will be able to talk, to work, to play, to accomplish whatever is needed. The physics of that place will outstrip any science fiction or other imaginative work that we have encountered. It will be wonderful.

It will not be Peter at the gate, but Jesus who is himself the gate, according to the Gospel of John 10:9, "I am the gate by which the sheep enter, whoever enters through me will be saved." So we have in John, chapter 10 a sense of the relational basis for knowing Jesus as the way to being with him into eternity. Relationship with Jesus is the way to escape the penalty for our rebellion against God, the way to agree with God's highest desires for our lives.

A colleague once preached at our Synod meetings that such a relationship and such a personal commitment was unimportant and perhaps even unbiblical. He used the gospel passage we read today and noted that it was not the individual's faith in Jesus, nor his theological belief that mattered. Rather it was only their ethical and compassionate commitment to the poor, the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the prisoner and the needy. It was on the basis of their deeds that Jesus divided the sheep from the goats. And so the preacher was more concerned about the people getting out of church than being in church, getting out to help the hungry, the thirsty, the sick, the prisoner and so on.

This passage, however, is not the only one in the Bible that tells about what is important to Jesus and what is of lasting value to the movement we call Christianity. James says that he was more interested in showing his faith by his works, in how he helps people, rather than just words. See James 2:14-17. He is so bold as to say that faith without the actions to back it up is dead.

From my point of view, the reality is that we need both faith and deeds, words and actions. We need both relationship with Jesus and the actions that flow from that relationship. It's not just the social action by itself. It's not just the words of faith, the words that make trusting God with our whole

lives real by themselves. It is both/and these two realities. In my opinion, that colleague of mine went too far when he said that the Lord only cared about our actions, not our words. He cares about both. Should the Church be more socially justice minded? Yes. Should the Church be more compassionate in its outreach and position in the community? Yes. And we need to help each other be this church together.

But we also need to help each other express the words of our faith, of our trust in God, of what it means to follow Jesus with our whole resources. Because if we can't do that, we can't really help others know God, and we can't really say why we are doing what we are doing. One of the great challenges today is connecting with those who find church to be irrelevant and the faith to be passé, or worse, abusive.

We need to be able to express our faith, to "in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. **Always** be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect..." (1 Peter 3:15) So it is not that James and Matthew are right but Peter is wrong. No. All the Scriptures complement one another. It would not make sense that we would only do what God wants in social action, but not really care about the words or the content of the faith. It only makes sense where the content of faith is meaningless. And if this is true, why are we listening to the teaching of Jesus at all? Why not just go off and do what is right in our eyes, as it often says in the book of Judges?

As we continue to search our hearts and our congregation for the right leaders, for the men and women who will help chart the course here into the next challenging years, let us ask ourselves first of all whether we are willing. First, we have to be willing to offer our time and abilities. Time is probably one of the most precious treasures we have. If we cannot make time for the Session meeting, once a month nine times per year, if we cannot make any time for committees or visiting, or for regular Sunday worship, then perhaps we cannot allow our names to stand for being an elder here. The group of elders is very flexible and we know that many jobs have us travelling. We know other jobs take our time and we can't give much. But can we accept the leadership position in good conscience, knowing our time commitment?

Second, are we willing to learn how to lead, to listen, to pray, to learn more about the Scriptures and how God speaks to us today? If we already know

all this, or if we aren't interested in these things, then maybe it is not time to consider leading. Leading is also about learning.

Finally, do we truly care about the health and condition of this congregation, of its mission and outreach, of its fellowship and harmony? We can care a great deal about God and about our neighbors, but do we care about this place that we call our spiritual home? If we do care, what are the evidences of that care here practically? How does that care affect our work, our attitudes, our relationships, our goals, dreams and total lives?

I can't answer these questions for anyone else but me. You can't answer these questions for anyone else but you. Our answers are important. This is a time for us to encourage others to search themselves for this important office. This is also a time to search ourselves for what we think about the faith, the church, our future here. These are important matters. This is why I've been giving tidbits throughout several sermons and the Rev. Dawn Griffiths will be giving a sermon series on the important subject of the eldership.

Let us trust God together, not only for that time when we stand before Jesus, with our earthly lives behind us, but also now, as we stand before Jesus, with the rest of our earthly lives before us here in this place.

Let us pray.