

May 2, 2010: AT HOME IN GLORY
Revelation 21:1-6a, John 13:31-35, Psalm 148
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Glory isn't what you think it is. We Americans confuse glory with celebrity—high media visibility, power, talent, high fashion. The problem with celebrity is that it so easily unravels into “being famous for being famous” (like Paris Hilton) rather than being famous for what one does (like Brandon Roy). Jesus does not confuse glory with celebrity. Back in his day, glory was grease on the skids of human interaction, almost a commodity in relationships. When glory was applied to the human relationship with God, we called it worship. All Jesus' talk today about glorifying God can be read in terms of the honor-shame society, that Jesus is making an honor claim for himself, both because of obedient sonship and because of a manliness associated with stoic death. For that matter, the crucifixion and resurrection can be read in terms of honor-shame, with God losing honor by appearing to abandon Jesus in the shameful of the crucifixion and regaining honor by raising him from death.

This social-science interpretation of glory might give us context, but I've always found the glory talk distracting. It was a happy coincidence that this passage fell in the same weekend as the confirmation retreat so that the confirmands could at least help me figure out what it means. We spent time with the Westminster Confession's first question. You remember that first question: What is the chief end of humankind? To glorify God and enjoy God forever. With the confirmands, we decided that to give something glory means you're willing to stake your life on it, that you think it's the ultimate whatever. This is precisely where “glory” stops being safe. The dangerous point Jesus makes here is that glory isn't just between himself and his Father. Glory is also part of our portfolio, what we are commanded to do, an implication of the resurrection for us. What the confirmands figured out was that we get to have glory when we love God with all we have, when we believers are knit together, when we are really *with* Jesus. Just *loving* God is what gives God glory. The *commandment* Jesus gives us, the one task we're supposed to finish before our glorification is complete, is to love *each other*. How hard could that be? Sometimes it seems like it would be easier to save the world or end war or cure disease. But then, we haven't been very good at those things, either.

The year my daughter graduated from high school, our church honored the graduates in worship. The graduates were to say a few words to the congregation, maybe say thanks for loving them through their teen years, then shake the pastor's hand and sit down. One my daughter's friends made what she thought was a mature and reasoned statement of thanks to the congregation. As the daughter of professional church people, she knew the realities and warts of life in Christian community, so she quoted Henri Nouwen's definition of Christian community, saying that it's “the place where the person who drives you the most crazy is.” The congregation spent the next three months trying to figure out which of them had driven this sweet, shy girl crazy and over what.

Love for each other may be the defining characteristic of believers, but it's not always what first comes to mind. When the confirmands talked yesterday about what church is, we covered the Six Great Ends of the church, and it began to sound more like tasks we gotta accomplish. On one mission trip to Juarez, Mexico, we asked Pastor Jorge what our most effective witness to his neighborhood might be. We thought he would mention the dental clinic we'd built, the school we'd repainted, the widow's house we'd repaired, the concrete we'd poured, even the risk of bringing our gringo digestive systems to live in a border town barrio. Jorge simply said, “They know you love Jesus because you love each other.”

This is our work, the work Jesus requires of us when we are called after his name. This one thing is God's enduring, abiding will: that we love each other. The love he commands is not a mere feeling. The "love chapter" of 1 Corinthians notwithstanding, that love isn't even something we do. This love is *who we become*, the more we come to know God. This is why we need the passage from the Book of Revelation today—to show us what that looks like. When all is complete, everything will be made new. It won't be a matter of new and different things replacing the old.¹ Instead, what "is" is transformed. Starting with Babel, cities in scripture had *always* been depicted as evil. Now, with the New Jerusalem, "city" finally personifies salvation, a city brimming with all that is good about human community. For a change. The Revelator is telling us with this vision that the final hope is not that we go to heaven when we die. Salvation is not us going to God. Salvation is God living with us, through us, in us.

Jesus gives us his version of the Starship Enterprise commission, to "Boldly go where no one has gone before!" Just love each other. How hard could it be? It sounds suspiciously like something your mother would tell you—"Just be friends with each other." My own mother had strongly held views about what was expected of friends. In her mind, it was the worst kind of betrayal to be a "fair weather friend"—to break a commitment because "something better" came along or to only hang with someone because there was no one more cool to hang with. To be a friend—the kind of friend Jesus tells us his followers must be to each other—takes discipline. Loyalty, tolerance, trust, respect, forgiveness, commitment. Lately I've come to understand that friendship requires something else as well: whitespace. By that I mean, a friend has left enough room in their life, enough time and energy, for you. I wonder if these friendship disciplines apply toward an institution or a group as well as toward individuals.

I read a story this week² about the Reverend Joachim Alexandropoulos, who was an Orthodox priest on a Greek island during World War II. One day the Nazis came demanding that he provide them with a list of every Jew on the island. When they returned the next day, he handed them a list containing only one name: his own. That is the ultimate act of friendship, the sort of thing Jesus did for us. Our friendships probably won't be tested to these utmost limits. For most of us, the normal disciplines of friendship are all that will be required. Leave time and emotional space to love each other. Don't over-commit, but keep the commitments you do make. Show respect for another's time, honor their gifts, overlook their faults, give them another chance. If we're to take Jesus at his word, this is the beginning of glory, because it's the beginning of love. How hard could it be?

¹ WorkingPreacher.org, Rev 21:1-6 Brian Peterson.

² Frank L. Crouch, WorkingPreacher.org

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