

Sermon 2: The Uniqueness of Jesus: Jesus alone call heaven home

In his play *Our Town*, Thornton Wilder tells the story of life as it is lived out amid the hassles of daily living in Grover's Corners at the turn of the twentieth century. The lessons the play teaches are like a mirror held out to all of us. We see the routine in all its monotony - the milk arrives, breakfast is eaten, working people go to their jobs, homemakers tidy their homes, handymen work in their yards- each day reflecting the previous one. In the play, the turning point comes when Emily Gibbs, in her youthful prime, dies at the age of 26, giving birth to her second child and the routine is suddenly broken.

From the realm of the dead, Emily is given a chance to return to earth for a day of her choice as it was actually lived out when she was on earth. Only now from her otherworldly existence, she viewed it with nostalgic eyes. She watched the harried activity and busyness in celebration of her twelfth birthday. As she well remembered, the household was preoccupied with presents and food and chatter. The party buzzed with activity. But now in this irreversible state, Emily noticed the complete loss of any personal attention, though her heart craved it. She says:

"Oh, Mama just look at me one minute as though you really saw me. Mama fourteen years have gone by. I'm dead. You're a grandmother, Mama. I married George Gibbs, Mama. Wally's (Emily's brother) dead too. Mama, his appendix burst on a camping trip to North Conway. We felt just terrible about it - don't you remember? But, just for a moment now we're all together. Mama, just for a moment we're happy. Let's look at one another."

Her mother cannot hear Emily as she pleads with her to really see her. The focus instead, was on the things that needed to be done, rather than on the people for whom it was done.

They could not hear her because they were trapped by the superficial. As she bids her final farewell, she cried: "Good-by, Good by, world. Good-by, Grover's Corners.... Mama and Papa. Good-by to clocks ticking.... and Mama's sunflowers. And food and coffee. And new ironed dresses and hot baths.... and

sleeping and waking up. Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you."

Then she turns to the stage manager, who serves as the narrator, and asks this remorse-filled question: "Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it - every, every moment?"

The answer comes, "No. The saints and poets, maybe - they do some"

The Gospel of John also raises Emily's questions and answers it by saying that when we see Jesus clearly for who he is we no longer need to be trapped by the superficial. We are more able to live life with a deepening sense of awe and wonder alert to the world around us and the people with whom we live day by day.

This morning we will consider this as we think of Jesus' uniqueness in that he alone calls heaven home and promises to make his home with us on earth when we invite him to.

In the passage from John's Gospel appointed for today Jesus says at verse 19: "Because I live, you also will live". In saying this Jesus is not talking about the 33 years he lived in the first century Palestine. At the beginning of verse 19 he says "In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me." He then goes on to say "because I live you also will live." The world will think that he is dead because it witnessed his crucifixion. However the disciples will see him after the Resurrection. In seeing the resurrected Jesus the disciples will come to grasp something that had not been seen by them before. What they will grasp is Jesus' eternal nature. So when he then goes on to say at verse 20: "On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me and I in you" he is saying that we can share in this life that is eternal. And it isn't something that waits only for us beyond the grave. Here Jesus is addressing Emily Gibb's question to the stage manager. Do human beings ever realize life while they live it? And here is Jesus' answer. When we know that his life is eternal then we too can really live.

To put this another way, as we realize that Jesus' earthly sojourn was a

visitation from heaven we see life in a way that is closed to us otherwise. You see, the author of time, who lived in the eternal was made a man in time that we might live with the eternal in view. Jesus came to remind us that we, who are bound to the temporal, live life on the surface as did the people of Grover's Corners when we don't know him. For though we can continue to exist, we miss life for what it was meant to be. He wants us to live life through the lens of the eternal. That happens as we see his uniqueness as portrayed on the pages of the Gospels. The gospels show us that his explanation of life, his glimpses into what really matters and what does not matter proceed out of his being in the eternal. At verses 21 and following look at what Jesus says: "They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them." He is telling us that as we listen carefully to what he says and hold on to his words we will encounter more fully what Jesus means by the word "life" as he reveals himself to us.

What does such a revelation look like? Well I am reminded of a parishioner who a while back was praying. This person was praying about their work situation. At first the person was thanking Jesus for the good job and good pay and relatively straight-forward work they do Monday through Friday. Then this person clearly heard Jesus speak to his conscience words like this: "You know why the work is easy don't you? Your work environment is unethical and is not the place for you to be." This person is now beginning to prayerfully discern what changes need to be made so that his work is being governed by the one whose life is changing his life.

Or I think of the time we had away on our youth weekend three weeks ago. During our evening conversation on the Saturday one of the young adults who came along to help lead the session talked about becoming a Christian at the age of fourteen. This person is now in his twenties. Because of the decision he made to follow Jesus then it influenced much of how he lived as a teenager. Because Jesus life was shaping his life he is still a virgin and did not use drugs throughout his teen years. One of the boys on the weekend was so inspired by this testimony that as a person entering into adolescence he wants to follow the example set by this young man.

Each one of these stories helps us to better understand what Jesus means when he says he will reveal himself to those who see that what he says does really matter because he is the eternal one. As we experience his revelation then we are able to see that the way we live matters.

As we will see over the next six weeks, it is because Jesus' origin is different from every other religious teacher that what he says needs to be seen as having an authenticity that Muhammad and Buddha do not have. Every other person who is at the heart of any religion has had a beginning. Jesus did not. Remember the opening words of John's Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word (this is Jesus), and the Word was with God and the Word was God..... And then at verse 14 it says "And the word became flesh and dwelt among us". John begins his Gospel by declaring that Jesus, who is at the heart of Christianity existed when the universe began some five to fourteen billion years ago.

Muhammad by contrast had a beginning like every other human being born. He was born in Mecca around 570 AD and died in 632 AD. Unlike Jesus his conception was not by the Holy Spirit. And unlike Jesus he made no claim to heaven as his origin. There is one verse in the Koran, Surah 17.1 that can be interpreted as a momentary excursion into heaven. (Glory to him who made his servant go on a night from the Sacred Mosque to the remote mosque of which we have blessed the precincts). And even if this is what the text does mean, what warranted the heavenward journey for the night was that heaven was foreign to Muhammad, whereas Jesus referred to it as home.

And what about the Hindu prince named Siddhartha Guatama (or Gotama) who became Buddha? He too had a beginning, around the year 563 BC. He left his home in the palace, turning his back on his wife and son, in search of an answer, how do I find enlightenment? He did not start with the answer. Jesus did not begin His mission by leaving more comfortable surroundings in order to gain enlightenment so that he would find the answer to life mysteries. That was the origin of Buddhism.

He did not come to give a certain group of people ethnic worth, so that they too could have an identity as others around them did; Islam had its beginning for

such reasons. Islam from the beginning was primarily predisposed toward one particular people. There is very little doubt that in its inception, Islam was a geopolitical reaction to the other groups around them. Even those sympathetic to Islam, such as Ali Dashti, the noted Iranian journalist, comment that the greatest miracle in Islam is that it gave Mohammed's followers an identity they had lacked as various warring tribal groups. The very language of the Koran is restrictive. To claim that Mohammed's only miracle was the Koran and then to state that one can not recognize the miracle unless one knows the language, Arabic, makes a miracle anything but universal. How can a "prophet to the world" be so narrowly restricted to a language group? The Koran, it is said, is only inspired in the original language-no other language can bear the miracle. The narrowness of its ethnic appeal cannot be denied. **(End note from Jesus Among Other God's Page 190).**

He did not come to exult a culture because it was the recipient of God's moral law, a boast the Hebrews delighted in.

His strong and unequivocal claim was that heaven was his dwelling place and the earth his place of visitation. There never was a time when he was not. There never will be a time when he will not be. His was a positing of truth from an eternal perspective that was and is unique

And so when Jesus says in verse 24 of the passage for today: "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them", Jesus is saying something like this. When he is the focus of our lives, or when we are learning to pay more attention to him, which is what it means to love, then his life will fill our lives with meaning. And yet he also gives a warning. Look at the end of verse 24: "Whoever does not love me does not keep my words: and the word that you hear is not mine, but it is from my Father who sent me." The warning is that people can live their lives in this world without any regard toward Jesus but when we do this we disregard the one who is most important.

And yet as we are learning to pay close attention to Jesus he will make his home with us. When that happens his priorities will become our priorities.

When Jesus makes his home with us worship becomes central to our lives. We realize that we come to church on Sunday and find ways to worship during the week because we want to pay attention to Jesus. For just as Emily Gibbs yearned for her mother to notice her, God longs for us to really pay attention to him. We know this because the first four commandments speak of this and Jesus in John's Gospel repeatedly speaks about our loving him.

As we learn to pay attention to Jesus we can then pay closer attention to ourselves and other people. When that happens, like the parishioner I mentioned at the beginning, we are able to look more honestly at our lives, aware that the way we live our Monday to Friday lives is to reflect our love for Jesus. Living in the light of Jesus' presence we realize that our priorities do matter. If we listen to Jesus he will come into our lives and make his home among us so that the way we work, the way we play, the way we relate to our spouse and children, and to others will allow us to really see them.

To get up, go through the routine of the week is to exist but it isn't to live. However when we awake in the morning with the name of Jesus on our lips and his love in our hearts then we see in all of the routines of daily life the opportunity to reflect and distribute the love of Christ then we will live because we know he lives.

And it is people who see in Jesus the one who calls heaven home that in answer to Emily Gibb's question really live life in the here and now. Every, every moment.