

Finding Our Place

5th Sunday of Easter, May 10, 2020

In the real estate business, there is a cliché that has been around since the 1920's. You've likely heard it before. It says that the *value* of a property depends on three things: "*location, location, & location.*" It's the particular **place** where the property is planted, they say, that matters most of all (*at least in terms of dollar value.*)

This Sunday's scripture readings have nothing to do with real estate or money, but I was reminded of that "*location, location, location*" cliché as I was reflecting on them. Because a theme running through them all is that "**location**" is also the key to spiritual value.

These particular scriptures don't refer to finding a '*physical*' place to call home. They don't refer to finding our place '*socially*' — connecting with other people who enrich our lives. And they don't refer to finding our '*vocational*' place in life — where we're discerning & using our personal gifts for the good. They don't **deny** that finding our place in these physical & social & vocational aspects of our lives is extremely important — both for our own spiritual wellbeing — and for our capacity to affect the wellbeing of others in positive ways. But they are pointing to a another place.

A place that remains enriching & empowering — whether the physical, social, or vocational conditions in our lives are "*great*" — or "*not that great.*" A place of grace, where (*as the old prayer says*), we find the *serenity* to accept the things we cannot change; the *courage* to change the things we can; and the *wisdom* to know the difference. It's a place that is real — that we can actually enter, be 'located' in, and call our own — but it is invisible.

In this morning's first reading from the Acts of the Apostles, Stephen is standing in this invisible place. He describes it as the place where Christ, the forgiving victim, is "*standing at the right hand of God.*" The place of ultimate dignity, worth, & power — which are born not of violence, but of love. And Stephen is "*there*" with him (*even though outwardly, as we heard, his feet are very much "on the ground."*) Outwardly, he is standing in the most precarious of places. Surrounded by violent men who perceive him as evil and are seeking to destroy him — his physical & social conditions are the worst, and there is nothing he can do to change them. So in this very extreme case, the writer of Stephen's story (which is Luke the apostle) is showing us that Stephen is consciously "in two places at the same." And the result of this is that — when these violent men have their way with him — Stephen is enabled to re-enact the Passion of Christ. Instead of being filled with fear & hate, he experiences compassion, kneels down, and before he dies cries out in a loud voice, "*Lord, do not hold this sin against them.*"

Stephen's discovery that, within this mortal life, he could be "*in two places at the same time*" — was so crucial — that it became a spiritual principle & instruction in the epistles: "*Be transformed by the renewing of your minds*" (Rom. 12:2.) "*Set your minds on the things which are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God — and where you are — hidden with Christ in God*" (Col. 3:1-3.) This was the key — not just to benefiting in the midst of terrible situations — but to loving others in the here & now, as Christ is loving us. It was the key to the gospel itself. Being where you are, with your feet firmly planted on the earth. And, at the same time, being in the invisible place, with Christ, at the right hand of God, the place where ultimate dignity, worth & power are born of love.

It's not a call to close our eyes and pretend that we're not really here, but in Heaven with Jesus. We could all do that easily enough (*to our detriment & that of the world around us.*) It's not a call to "multi-task," and mentally shift back & forth between earthly & heavenly thoughts. Instead it's a call to be both on earth and in Heaven at the same time, to be both citizens of the world (1st Cor. 9:19-23) and "*citizens of Heaven*" (Phil. 3:20.)

It is something that we can't actually do by ourselves, but is "the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:33), working within our minds (as it was within the mind of Stephen, and within the mind of Jesus before him.) So it's not so much a "strategy," as something to pray for and be receptive to.

In this morning's psalm (31:1-5, 15-16), this invisible place is called a "*refuge*," and a "*castle*," in which God's face shines upon us and we are saved by loving kindness.

In our second reading (1st Peter 2:2-10), Peter calls this place a "spiritual house," in which Christ is the cornerstone, and we "like precious living stones" are built into.

In our gospel reading from John (14:1-14), Jesus calls it "*My Father's House*," and assures the disciples that it contains "many mansions," so there is plenty of space for everyone. We often understand this text as referring to a Heaven that can only be hoped for, but not actually occupied, until after death. And then, we think that Jesus is only talking about the end of time when he says "*I will come again and take you to myself, so that you will be where I am — seated at the right hand of God.*" But he's also talking about his "coming again" at Pentecost, in the gift of the Holy Spirit, to open their minds to the possibility of being with him in his "Father's House," and here on earth, at the same time. It's only at Pentecost (*after already witnessing his life, death, resurrection, & ascension*), that it becomes clear to them that Heaven is not only accessible at death, or at the end of time, but is also here now, invisibly, in their midst. And that "*rocks their world*" (as it did for Stephen) and empowers them to have an influence that changed the world forever and is still reverberating this morning.

And so it leaves us with a key question about Christian life. Maybe it has more to do with "*location*" than, for generations, we have imagined. What if (whether you're mowing the lawn or cooking spaghetti — whether you're alone — or surrounded by people who care for you — or dealing with a difficult person or situation that has you "*at your wit's end*") you could **also** be in Heaven, sitting (or standing) with Christ at the right hand of God, receiving the dignity & worth & power that come from being absolutely loved as you are?

It sounds very strange, I know. It may seem beyond belief and not "practical." But it could be what really makes all the difference. And if it's a **gift** that can only be grasped through the renewing of our minds by the Holy Spirit, I believe it's a gift worth praying for and being open to receive. Even now.

Let us pray.

Holy Trinity,

*Give us the gift to see & sense
that we are with you in Heaven,
and that you are with us on Earth,
so that wherever we are at, and in all that we do,
we will know the dignity & power of your love.
We pray together in your holy name, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.*

Amen.

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