

MISSION HILLS UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
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“Discipleship and Heaven”
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Today was to be the day of David Bahr’s installation as Pastor. Instead, he is ill, and this church’s ministry has been slowed down, we hope, only for a short time. We all are praying for Pastor David with faith that our prayers will hasten his healing. Just as Jesus assured his disciples that when they loved him and kept his word he and the Father would come and make their home with them, and the Holy Spirit also would come to them; so, too, we are assured that our prayers are real and effective because our love is continuous with the love of God. “Believe me,” Jesus said in a passage just prior to ours, “Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father in me; or else believe me for the sake of the works themselves” (John 14: 11) Jesus’s works brought God’s healing and love close and made them visible and real to his disciples. I believe that wonderful works are being done in this church today and will be done in the future. I believe this is because I have seen them done here before.

Pastor David asked me to preach today because he knows that I love this church and am concerned about its flourishing in the future. As a child I was baptized and confirmed here. It was here that I met faithful disciples of Christ and through them learned that God’s realm of love and of power, heaven if you will, was real and attractive. Pastor Kermit White had the serious demeanor of a war veteran who has seen death and hell, but his experience didn’t prevent him from taking me seriously, and he put in my hand my first book of theology, one by Harry Emerson Fosdick. I was immediately attracted to the goodness I found in that book. On Sunday evenings a dedicated woman seminarian led our youth group in fun activities, followed by prayers in the mysterious, darkened chapel. She also took us to camp at Pilgrim Pines where two recently retired missionaries from East Asia spoke to us. Although they had the lost-at-sea look of people newly returned to the States after decades away, they inspired me with their stories, their knowledge of Christ and of the Church. Something in me wanted to be like them. For confirmation class, a faithful business man, who apologized for not being a trained theologian, nevertheless led us through the lessons, and I felt

well-prepared. I sang in the choir under the direction of Dan Odum, who treated me with kindness and respect and instilled a love for sacred music.

Right now this church is asking why do we, or why should we, have a ministry to children, youth, and families? Why is this important to the whole church? Although clearly my past experience has led me to value this ministry because it launched me onto my own life's path, it is not my role to answer these questions. The Faith Formation Ministry will conduct focus groups to begin to respond to them. But perhaps I can shed some light on the questions by interpreting them in terms of today's scripture passages, with an emphasis on two important themes that both Jesus and Luke-Acts understand to be interrelated: discipleship and heaven.

When I was young, faithful ministers modeled for me what discipleship looked like, and their preaching, prayers, and caring made me--a child in a family whose preference was for science over religion--made me wonder about what was meant by language about God, Jesus, and heaven. Perhaps I believed back then that heaven was an ethereal, light-infused space where I would meet both Jesus and my beloved grandmother again, but as I grew I came to see that heaven concerns the here and now, not merely as a psychological state or feeling of bliss possibly brought on by spiritual practices or techniques. Instead, heaven is a state of affairs that is coming toward us, taking place in our midst. Heaven is the "real world" in its mode of God's realm being now "at hand." Luke-Acts believes that discipleship opens the way into the "real world" in its mode as God's realm now at hand. And Jesus's words in John teach about the foundation of discipleship as a particular kind of relationship with God, one of mutual indwelling. In Acts, Paul, Lydia, Silas and others make discipleship visible through their actions. The truth is that discipleship is a blessing that leads to true joy.

Today's reading from Acts puts discipleship on display in multiple ways. First, Paul acts like a disciple when he has a vision and immediately obeys God's call to sail to Philippi. This is his first mission into a European city and, by a river where people pray, he meets Lydia, a seller of purple goods. The Greek says that "the Lord opened her heart to give heed to what was said by Paul," and she and her household are baptized, thus becoming the first converts in Europe. Right away, Lydia generously invites Paul and Silas to stay at her home. But a conflict arises with another group of people, and Paul and Silas are accused of disturbing

the city. They are flogged and thrown in jail. Then at about midnight when they are praying and singing hymns, a miracle happens. “Suddenly there was a great earthquake so that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and every one’s fetters were unfastened.” But Paul and the others do not run away; instead, they stay and reassure the jailer who, as a result asks to be baptized with all his family. And this jailer brings Paul and Silas up into his house, washes their wounds from their beatings, and sets food before them, rejoicing with all his household that he now believed in God.

What a story! With a domino effect, one disciple after the other is shown the joy that comes from belief in Jesus. They all act spontaneously and with generosity towards one another. This story inspired Charles Wesley’s wonderful hymn, written in 1738 on the occasion of his conversion, called “And Can it Be?” or simply, “Amazing Love.” It is one of my favorites; perhaps you know it, too. The 4th verse depicts Paul in jail at Philippi:

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Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fast bound in sin and nature’s night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray – ,
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free;
I rose, went forth and followed thee.
My chains fell off, my heart was free;
I rose, went forth and followed thee.

5 No condemnation now I dread;
Jesus, and all in him is mine!
Alive in him, my living Head,
And clothed in righteousness divine,
Bold I approach the eternal throne,
And claim the crown, through Christ my own.
Bold I approach the eternal throne,
And claim the crown, through Christ my own.

There is a lot of debate today about Jesus’s resurrection, what really happened, and what intelligent, rational people are entitled to believe. This is not new—it has been going on since the early days of the Christian movement. But some theologians say that the surest way to see Jesus’s resurrection is to feed the

poor. When people do that, not only will the scales drop from their eyes so that they can see, but they also actually will participate in resurrection reality, or heaven, if you will.

The ancient theologians knew about this, especially those who read and understood Origen and Gregory of Nyssa and their teaching about our God-given spiritual senses, all of it biblically based. A number of theologians are writing about these spiritual senses right now with important results for the life of faith. Current research on the human physical senses also astonishes and, in a parallel or analogous way, gives credence to the writing on spiritual senses. The bottom line is that we human beings have far more sensory capabilities, both physical and spiritual, than we give ourselves credit for. I recommend the recent book entitled *Sentient: How Animals Illuminate the Wonder of Our Human Senses* by Jackie Higgins and British theologian Sarah Coakley's *The Spiritual Senses*.

The author of Luke-Acts knew about the possibility of seeing resurrection reality and he puts on display the link between heaven and discipleship in the wonderful exchange between Jesus and the rich young ruler in Luke 18. Precisely in response to the man's question about how to inherit eternal life, Jesus delivers the command to "Sell all that you have and distribute your money to the poor," but "the man became sad and walked away for he was very rich." Note that Jesus's message changes depending on the person to whom he is speaking. For example, his response to Zacchaeus, also a wealthy man, is to commend him because he gives half of what he owns to the poor. (19:8) And Luke in Acts shows Lydia also in a favorable light, as she used her wealth to offer hospitality to Paul and Silas.

We are left with an image of discipleship that opens the way into the "real world" in its mode as God's realm now at hand. This is accomplished through acts that mirror God's generosity. Specifically, disciples distribute gifts and blessings to the poor because they already have received bounteous gifts from God—life, beauty, goodness, and abundance. They have realized that discipleship is itself the primary blessing and the energy for it comes from the primary gift of God's own self through Christ.

One final word: in John 14 Jesus responds to Philip who has asked him to show them the Father, "Have I been with you so long, and you do not know me,

Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father; how can you say 'Show us the Father.' Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me?"

This expression may sound strange to our ears, conditioned as we are to separateness, boundaries, the desire for privacy, and rugged individualism. By contrast, ancient and medieval people experienced the coinherence that Jesus speaks of. They spoke of it as characterizing the Trinity where the three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, interpenetrate one another in a dance of mutual love, called *perichoresis* in the Greek and *circumincessio* in Latin. And they spoke of it when they talked about God and their own self, as Augustine did in the First Book of the *Confessions* where he said, "I would have no being, God, unless you were in me; or rather, I would have no being if I were not in you."

Our ancestors also spoke of coinherence in love as describing their experiences of each other, of student-teacher relationships, of lovers, of relationships in community and between saints and sinners. And when they prayed for one another, this coinherence endowed their prayer with reality and substance. They would ask their friends to "Give me God" through intercessory prayer, and experience taught them that the felt sense of God's presence was enhanced when others prayed for them. I also have grown to believe in loving coinherence as a real possibility, and I leave you with this question: what would our church communities be like if we all prayed as though this were true?