

Easter 4C 2022

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Our reading from Revelation today presents us with a vision of heaven that contradicts many popular versions.

In it, heaven is described as containing a great multitude of people that no one can count. Heaven is, in other words, not the province of a few extremely religious, rule following zealots.

It is the joyous land of all those who long for God.

As the parable of the wedding party reveals, all are invited in and need only be sincere in their desire to be there.

That one guy who cared so little about the wedding that he would not even dress appropriately was thrown out as insincere.

God, like any loving parent, like the father of the prodigal son, invites in all of us who are sincere whenever we decide we want to be with God.

In the meantime, we wander.

All of us spend some time wandering.

It is, I suspect, an important part of our growth, like Rumspringa for the Amish.

We cannot make a meaningful, sincere choice until we have experienced the options.

We cannot love God truly, in other words, until we know what life away from God is like.

Those who experience the ordeal, as Revelation calls our current existence, of being partially separate from God and discover from that a passion for what is good, that is, a passion for God, are welcomed back by God.

Revelation describes them not as perfect, but as simply joyful to be with God, the source of all that is good.

These are the people whom Jesus described in the sermon on the mount as blessed, those who long for justice and love and truth.

They may have made many mistakes along the way.

Perhaps they hurt people, maybe they spent time seeking meaning in all the wrong places.

They may have hidden their truth even from themselves for a time, but, at some point, they found that they longed for justice, love, and truth.

Whether or not we recognize that *God* is the fulfillment of those longings, whether or not we are able to express it in words, God responds to those longings and leads us to that for which we long.

We read in Revelation, for example, that those near God will not want for anything.

“They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their

shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Their longing will be fulfilled.

God’s openness need not surprise us.

We know from our own experiences that this is the case with any relationship.

The only requirement for being in a relationship with someone is a mutual desire to be in relationship.

Jesus tells us that, from the start, God desires to be in relationship with everyone—that was the entire point of creating us—so the ball is in our court.

If we long for God, that is, if we long for what is good and meaningful and whole, then we are in a relationship with God.

We are even more blessed when we recognize that.

Despite God’s desire to be in relationship with everyone, people nevertheless have succeeded in depicting heaven as an exclusive resort for specific people, people who suit them culturally, but Revelation tells us that the uncountable multitude come “from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages.”

Our attempts to convince ourselves that everyone in heaven is just like us stem from insecurity.

We want to believe that we have got everything right, but the truth is, none of us have.

I recall when Marge Simpson goes to heaven and is made uncomfortable by the playful joy of some of the people she encounters there.

She is distressed to see that Jesus is having fun with those on the rowdy side of heaven.

The episode reminds me of Flannery O’Conner’s short story, “Revelation,” in which the central character, Mrs. Turpin, is a self-righteous, judgmental woman.

She has opinions about everyone in the doctor’s office waiting room.

As the story unfolds, Mrs. Turpin has a vision of people entering heaven.

People whom she never expected to see there, the “unwashed masses,” as it were, are leaping and shouting at the front of the line.

Their joy is like that described in Revelation.

“Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

It is a formal translation, but you get the picture.

“Yeehaw! God is awesome!”

People like Mrs. Turpin, on the other hand, stand quietly, decorously at the back of the line.

The people at the front of the line are driven joyfully forward by unbridled excitement over being close to God.

Those at the back are not as engaged, not as joyful and, though O'Conner does not say this outright, I suspect they may have fallen behind through lack of enthusiasm.

For me, at least, this is the central point of the story.

God did not put them in the back; they lagged behind because they simply longed for it less.

A related point in the story is the reason Mrs. Turpin had felt so uncomfortable around the other people in the waiting room.

There is much to learn about ourselves from those who make us uncomfortable.

Often, it is because they threaten to make us aware of something within ourselves that we would rather ignore, which is the case with Mrs. Turpin.

She accused others in the doctor's waiting room of worthlessness to distract from her own feelings of worthlessness.

She was unaware in any meaningful way of God's love for her, thus she experienced no joy.

It is those who are unaware of God's love for them who do the most damage in the world.

For Mrs. Turpin, Christianity was primarily a way of trying to feel superior.

It never healed her feelings of worthlessness because she would first have to admit that she had them.

Those in her vision who were joyfully dancing at the front of the line, who were reveling in being children of God, delighting in God's love for everyone, were an affront to Mrs. Turpin.

When we are not aware that God loves us as we are, when we are consciously or unconsciously ashamed of who we are, we tend to spread alienation.

We may become self-righteous, judgmental, and shift our focus from God to others, which hinders our relationship with God.

God is open to all who long for truth and wholeness, even though they may not have experienced much of it, and invites all to rejoice with God.

It is not that we are saved, so we get to be with God, as the legalists would have us believe, but that we want to be with God, so we are saved.