

Balancing Heaven and Earth

A Sermon on Acts 1: 6-14

Delivered on May 28, 2016 at Northminster Presbyterian Church in North Canton, Ohio

When I was growing up as a kid in the seventies and eighties, Sunday was a day full of rituals. Our parents would take my brother King and I to church each Sunday morning, and after church we would always have a Sunday dinner that my mother cooked over a hot stove. If it was a Sunday during the fall, after dinner we would then usually watch NFL football, which for us was the Atlanta Falcons and they were no better than the Browns in those days. But the most special Sunday ritual for us is when we would turn on the radio to listen to the four hour show that every kid in America was listening to, Casey Kasem's American Top 40. On this show each Sunday afternoon, the late Casey Kasem would count down the forty most popular songs in the nation for that week. And I remember that at the end of every show, after going all the way from number 40 to number 1, Casey Kasem would close his show by telling his listeners, "Remember, until next week, keep your feet on the ground, and keep reaching for the stars."

'Keep your feet on the ground and keep reaching for the stars.' Now, I don't think Mr. Casem had anything theological in mind when he said that, but that sounds like good advice for the church. In the church we say "Be in the world but not of the world." Be in the world, keep your feet on the ground, and keep reaching for the stars, but do not be of the world.

It is obvious, I think that sometimes instead of having our feet on the ground the church can have one or sometimes both feet in the kingdom of heaven. There is a story about the philosopher Thales, who lived in what is now Turkey some 2600 years ago. Thales was apparently so fascinated by the mysteries of the universe and the heavens that he would walk around all day and night looking up in the sky. Well, apparently one day poor Thales fell into a

well because he was so fascinated with looking above that he didn't see what was right in front of him. Sometimes, I think that is the church. And that seems to have something to do with the story we hear today from the book of Acts. As the disciples are with Jesus in Galilee after he has risen from the dead, he starts ascending into heaven. Now, I don't know about you, but I have always wondered what this scene was like. Do you think Jesus floated up to heaven like a balloon or did he take off like a rocket? I don't know. But as he got higher and higher into the clouds the disciples kept looking at him longingly as if to say come back, come back. But just then we are told that two men in white stood by them and told them to stop. "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come again in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." In other words stop your star gazing like Thales. Take your eyes off of heaven because there are plenty of things for you to do down here on earth before Jesus returns.

But just how do we do that, exactly? Or to put the question another way, just how much of our focus should we take off of heaven? How much should we keep our feet on the ground as we keep reaching for the stars? For the problem, you see is that the kingdom of heaven for us in the church is not just some afterthought, it is not just something we tack on to our commitments to follow the golden rule and the Ten Commandments and all that stuff. The apostle Paul tells us that heaven is where we have our citizenship. It is our home. And as citizens of heaven, we give our ultimate allegiance to heaven and to the risen Christ who reigns in heaven.

But I think all of us recognize that there is something deeply wrong, deeply unchristian, and deeply unbiblical about sitting around waiting to go to heaven and caring nothing about this

life. You know, I am aware that all of us were horrified by the Manchester, England bombing this past week that killed twenty-two people and injured dozens more at a concert. It is horrifying that anyone would target innocent people and innocent people many of whom were very young and who had their whole lives ahead of them. And it is especially horrifying to think that anyone would target such people in the name of religious faith of all things. ISIS has claimed responsibility for this attack, and so far, we don't know for sure if they are responsible, but it really doesn't matter because they applaud it and they approve of it, so morally what difference does it make if they did it or not? Now, I know that I don't have to go around surveying all of you, I know that we are all outraged at the thought of taking innocent life in the name of religious faith, but when you think about it, is it that much better to neglect innocent life in the name of religious faith? I understand that none of us, and no Christian that I personally know would ever do any act of terror; no Christian that I personally know would deliberately take innocent life, but if we turn our backs on innocent life and allow innocent people to suffer and die should we really be patting ourselves on the back that much? Isn't there something clearly wrong with some Christian Thales who spends all his time looking up to heaven and ignoring the world below? Isn't there something clearly wrong with disciples who spend all their time looking up to the sky and waiting for Jesus' return as we see in our story today? Well, of course there is. Of course there is.

So what do we do? What does it mean for us to keep our feet on the ground but keep reaching for the stars? Well, I think we get a pretty good clue about what that means from the conversation Jesus has with his disciples in this story right before he ascends into heaven. The disciples say to Jesus, "When will you restore the kingdom to Israel, Lord?" That wasn't a bad

question for them to ask. Surely it was on their minds. The Lord had just risen from the dead and it was clear to the disciples now that in his triumph over death he really was the long awaited Messiah who would rule over God's people. So, naturally they wanted to know when the kingdom of God would finally come. But Jesus answers "It is not for you to know the dates and times the Lord has set by his own authority." Yes, we in the church have our citizenship in heaven, and that is where we have our home. But I think that what Jesus tells us here is that whenever we spend our time wondering and speculating about things that are either beyond our control or which are not about what we are told, then we are spending a little too much time in the kingdom of heaven. You know, so often I have talked to Christians who ask me about things that as a pastor they apparently think I must know the answers to because they are questions about God and as a pastor I must know because naturally, God tells me everything. So they'll say things like "Pastor, when will Jesus come back?"

"I don't know," I'll say, "only God knows."

"Pastor, where are the people who believe such and such going to go when they die?"

"I don't know. Only God knows."

"Pastor, why does God allow bad things to happen to good people?"

"I don't know, only God knows."

Believe it or not there are plenty of things about God I just don't know. And I'll tell you what, if you want to spend your time asking these kinds of questions, I suppose there's nothing wrong with that. People have written entire books about why God allows bad things to happen to good people and at what day and hour Jesus is coming back and some of those books are quite good, I am sure. When it comes to the question of when Jesus is coming back, there are

people who call themselves pre-millennialists and post-millennialists and pre-tribulationists and post-tribulationists. There are all kinds of positions and all kinds of theories, and if you are curious about all that stuff, I'd say that's fine. But reading these books and speculating about these kinds of questions will do nothing, not one thing to make us better Christians, because knowing the answers to these kinds of questions is God's job, not ours. What is our job? What do the prophets and the Lord Jesus tell us is our job? Well, they tell us to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with God. They tell us it is to share the good news of the gospel with all the people of the earth and baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. They tell us to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to visit the sick and those in prison. That's what our job is, and as far as the things go that we aren't told and only God knows about, leave those things to God.

And if you think about it, if you think about it, to keep looking up to the sky all day and all night is not a sign of belonging to heaven and having our citizenship in heaven, ironically it is a sign of belonging to this world. For the people who say I don't care about my neighbor, I could care less about those who are suffering, I could care less about other people's needs, those people are a dime a dozen. And I'll tell you something, as I said a few weeks ago, I am so proud of all the work we did to raise money and donate non-perishable food for the Stark County Hunger Walk, and I am proud of the work we have done to raise funds for the Pregnancy Choices center in our baby bottle campaign, but we only have to do these things, my friends because selfishness is everywhere. It is everywhere. No one should go hungry in a nation which is still the richest nation on the earth. No one should choose to throw life away or feel that they have to throw life away in a nation that has more than enough more than enough to support

life. Selfishness is everywhere. And so for all of us in the church to say I don't care about this world, and I don't care about the people in this world that God has made, I only care about heaven, that doesn't show that we belong to heaven. We show we belong to heaven and the king of heaven when we live differently from the rest of the world.

We will be in heaven soon enough, but while we are in this life, there is work to do. There is plenty of work to do. So keep your feet on the ground and keep reaching for the stars. Show that you belong to heaven, by living for this world that God has made.