

WHEN JESUS IS GONE

June 5, 2011

July 19th will be Harold Camping's 90th birthday. Do any of you know Harold? Well, you'd probably know him because you've heard his name in the news recently. Harold Camping never thought he'd celebrate his 90th birthday on July 19th because he's the one who predicted that the Rapture would come on May 21st!

Harold Camping: by training he is a civil engineer, but his fame has come from his civil engineer theology. You see, Harold Camping believes that the Bible is primarily is a numerological code and, in 1970, he wrote it down and he titled it *A Biblical Calendar of History*. In that calendar, creation happened in 11,013 B.C....and the flood in 4,990 B.C....and the Rapture on May 21, 2011. He was certain about that date, but we're still here...and so is he! By the way, the new date – he figured out he made a mistake – is October 21st this year!

The Rapture...the Rapture is that heavenly elevator that will snatch the holy righteous ones out of this miserable world and leave the worthless wicked ones behind. Now today's scripture is about a holy elevator, only in this case it's kind of the opposite of the Rapture. This elevator ride is for Jesus, not us. And in this scene...in this setting...the disciples – Jesus' disciples – are the ones who are getting left behind. And in getting left behind, they have no elevator or date for their heavenly ascent out of this world, nor will they. Jesus is crystal clear about that. Listen to what Jesus says:

“It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. It's not for you to know.”

In other words, Jesus is telling his disciples – and that means a long time ago and today in this room – that there's no escape hatch...there's no ejection seat...and there's no heavenly elevator for you and me. God, instead, has put us – you and me – in this world. And that means that this world is not something to get out of, but rather it's something to invest in and to redeem. This world...this world is the place: it's the place where we must be the human presence, and the holy power, and the heavenly passion, and the divine promise, and the physical engagement of Jesus...when Jesus is gone.

Yes, Jesus is the Savior of our lives. Jesus is the Lord of the church. And in so much of what we say and do in the church, He is our focus. But, for all of our focus on Jesus, the fact of the matter is that He has taken His ride on the heavenly elevator. He has ascended to His Father's glorious throne. He is gone. And now in these days after Jesus is gone, He is only in this world – He's **only** in this world – through us...through us! That means that Jesus has great expectations for us. Did you hear? Did you hear what He said to His disciples...and that means you and me? He said:

“...you will be my witnesses. You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. You will be my witnesses.”

Do you get it? Do you understand what Jesus is saying to us? Do you get what He's commanding?

You...me...we...will be His witnesses...in all the world!

So Jesus doesn't give us a choice! When Jesus is gone, you and I ***must*** be Jesus in this world. More than that, when Jesus is gone, we are ***blessed*** to be Jesus in this world!

Now I don't know how it is for all of you when your extended family gathers – and I suspect there are some extended families that have gathered here today because of two wonderful baptisms – but I've got to tell you that, when my extended family gathered, there was always drama. Somebody was mad at somebody else. Some people weren't speaking to other people. And then, at the kitchen sink as the dishes were being washed and dried, there was this little gossip about somebody out in the living room. It got so bad one year that my blessed grandmother said to the whole crowd: ***Can't we just get along?*** And, of course, the answer is ***NO!*** We can't just get along! No. We can't do it.

In the grief of leaving His beloved disciples for the cross, and the resurrection and, finally, for His celestial coronation...in the heaviness of Jesus' own heart...His biggest worry was not what was going to happen to Him, but what was going to happen to them...to His disciples...to His community. He was worried about their fragmentation. He was worried about their factionalization. He was worried about the rumors and the revenge of an ongoing, festering, and blazing family feud.

And Jesus was absolutely correct to worry. Do you know how many Christian denominations there are in this world? The count is about twenty-three thousand. Twenty-three thousand denominations world wide...and many of them, you know, are just simply determined to turn the difference of description and distinctions about how we do things particularly into the diminishment of discrimination. So many times denominations are determined to lift themselves up to an exclusive place before God by tearing down all the others around them. So, for example: ***Tim, you're wearing a yellow shirt.*** That's nice. But it's very different for me to say: ***Tim, you are wearing a yellow shirt!*** than it is for me to say, ***Well, Tim is wearing a yellow shirt. Would you just go home and change!*** Difference is not discrimination. It becomes discrimination when the difference is a cause for our diminishment of the other person.

Yes, Jesus knows us pretty well. And so Jesus prays for us...Jesus prays out His heart. He says:

“Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, even as we are one.”

That's Jesus' prayer, and it is indeed Jesus' promise...for us: ***that they may be one.*** So friends, when you think your prayers are unanswered...when you think your words offered to the Almighty are unheard...just remember that Jesus' prayer for us has been waiting for an answer for 2,000 years.

...that they may be one...that they may be one...

That text from the 17th chapter of the Gospel of John...that prayer that Jesus prays for us is, if you will, the motto, the memory verse, and the identity scripture for the United Church of Christ...***that they may be one.*** When the Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church merged 54 years ago this month, their dream was not to found

one more denomination! Their dream was to begin a movement that would, in fact, put an end to denominationalism...that would, in fact, answer Jesus' prayer...so ***that all may be one***...so that together we can be the *United Church of Christ*.

...that they may all be one...

The truth is, of course, that we can't be the answer to that prayer, and we can't be Jesus in this world when we're competing and fighting with each other...when we're dividing up the body of Christ...when we're slicing and dicing it more finely and more precisely than Ron Popeil's Veg-O-Matic! We can't be Jesus in the world until we determine to be one.

My guess is that we really don't much like Jesus' prayer after all, and we probably don't want it answered because, all through human history, religion has been about destructive competition. It's about who's going to win, not about healing communion, about being one. And that word communion...which means coming together as one...that word has represented some of the most nasty divisions through the history of the Christian church. Who gets to come to the table of Christ and who are we going to send away because they're wearing a yellow shirt? Religion, for us, has been so much about blessing us with the stratification of exclusivity, and not so very much about the unification of inclusivity. But that history of ours through 2,000 years doesn't change what Jesus prayed: ***...that they may all be one...*** ***That they all may be one***: whether they're Methodists, or Episcopalians, or Baptists, or Lutherans, or Seventh Day Adventists, or Orthodox, or Roman Catholic...***that they may all be one...*** That's the prayer, and it's not going to happen until we decide to do it...until we decide that we will be one in Jesus.

So say it with me. **We will be one in Jesus! We will be one in Jesus!**

...that they may all be one...

The answer to Jesus' prayer is in our hands, you see. We can't confess Jesus as our Lord and Savior when we try to conquer the world by dividing it up. Confessing Jesus means healing God's people by mending the factions...it means truly becoming a united church of Christ!

We will be one in Jesus! We will be one in Jesus!

It is the single most important thing that you and I can do to be Jesus in this world...to be one...to be one community in Christ. How can Jesus, after all, claim human hearts and change the world when His body is at war with itself?

Yes, we will be one in Jesus...aggressively, persistently, pre-emptively...we will be one in Jesus. That simply means that we're going to think and to care about the worth, and the dignity, and the needs and the salvation of the other person before we care about ourselves. It's that simple.

We will be one in Jesus! We will be one in Jesus!

...that they may all be one...

That's Jesus' prayer. And we can be its answer, because Jesus' promise to us is this:

“...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you...”

Being one, you see, isn't about only what *we* do. It's not *our* work alone. No, the Spirit – the Holy Spirit – gives us the inspiration, and the imagination and, yes indeed, the determination to be one in Jesus. Our unity is the best evidence that God's Spirit is at work in us...our unity is the very best evidence that God's Spirit is alive in our world...just as it is the most persuasive witness to Jesus and His love.

Friends, Jesus is gone. His earthly work is done. Yet ours is not. For us in this world, Jesus gives us a purpose. ***You will be my witnesses. You will be my witnesses.*** And then He prays for us: ***“...that they may all be one...”*** And then He makes us a promise: ***“...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you...”***

Now the torch is being passed. Now it's up to us.

...that they may all be one...

And what will our answer be? We will be one in Jesus. We will be one in Jesus. We will be the United Church of Christ! Amen.

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