

A couple decades ago I took a youth group to a concert featuring what was, at that time, a popular Christian rock group – Audio Adrenaline. The band had a hit song called: “Big, Big House.” Here are some of the lyrics:

I don't know if you got some shelter
Say a place to hide
I don't know if you live with friends
In whom you can confide
I don't know if you got a family
Say a mom or dad
***I don't know if you feel love at all
But I bet you wish you had***

[So] Come and go with me into my Father's house
Come and go with me into my Father's house.

[Here's the chorus:]

It's a big big house/With lots and lots of room
A big big table/With lots and lots of food
A big big yard/Where we can play football
A big big house/It's my Father's house

These lyrics spring from John 14:2, where Jesus says, “In my fathers’ house there are many dwelling places.” The Greek work for “house” (*oikia*) can also mean “household” or “family”, which indicates that Jesus is sharing how he is the way we are adopted into God's rapidly expanding family. A newer Scripture translation, the *Common English Bible*, renders John 14:2 this way: “My Father’s house has room to spare...”

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However catchy that song, I don’t think we’d find it on Stephen Hawking’s iPod.

Hawking, as many of you know, is a distinguished physicist who, in 1998, published *A Brief History of Time*. It sold over 10 million copies! In the book, Hawking references God metaphorically as a force that **could** explain the creation of the universe. Hawking’s nod to the possibility of God was welcomed by people of various faith traditions.

But in 2011, Hawking clarified that he does not believe in God nor an afterlife. Afflicted with Lou Gehrig’s disease for more than 60 years, Hawking was asked if he feared death. He answered: “I'm not afraid of death, but I'm in no hurry to die... I regard the brain as a computer which will stop working when its components fail. *There is no heaven or afterlife for broken down computers. That is a fairy [tale] for people afraid of the dark.*”

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Three things: First, Hawking seems to assume that only fearful people believe in something beyond this life: people “afraid of the dark.” But for many people, faith is an expression of love, not fear. And I would argue that, at its best, faith is based on love of the light, rather than fear of the dark. Second, Hawking’s statement strikes me as remarkably un-scientific, because science is based on empirical evidence. If he’d said, “I don’t **believe** in heaven or an afterlife” or “I **haven’t found evidence** of heaven or an afterlife” that’s one thing; but Hawking’s statement went beyond that. He said, “There is NO afterlife” which is something he cannot prove empirically. (It’s sort of like me making a definitive comment on theoretical physics.) Finally, is there a computer out there that was not ‘created’ by someone? Of course not; which suggests, as always, that it is not unreasonable to posit a ‘higher power’ or a ‘supreme being’ as the source of all that is.

A friend of mine – an atheist who’s tending towards agnosticism – provided me an excerpt from the book *First Contact* written by an astro-biologist, Mark Kaufman. As a scientist, Kaufman notes that the exquisite ‘fine-tuning’ of our universe makes it difficult to dismiss a “Creator” **hypothesis**. Kaufman shares a parable to outline the dilemma posed by how exquisitely fine-tuned our universe has to be to support life.

Suppose, Kaufman writes, a man is facing a firing squad and 50 expert marksmen are preparing to end his life. The word is given and a barrage of shots is fired. And yet, when the barrage ends, the target finds himself alive. What happened? Well, either he was extra-ordinarily lucky OR, more likely, all of them missed intentionally. Hawking’s position is that our being alive is just extraordinary luck. But was I the target in the scenario, I’d find it much more reasonable to think that the marksmen missed **intentionally**.

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More to the point, as the Rev, N.T. Wright writes, Stephen Hawking is [quote] “working with a very low-grade and sub-biblical view of [what] ‘going to heaven’ [means].”

Like Hawking, many Christians also work with low-grade and sub-biblical views of what going to heaven means. And I worry that this leads many Christians to ‘get in the way’ of those who might find hope and meaning in the gospel of Christ. Sometimes, the ways we get in the Way can be as farcical as setting a rapture date; the date on which the world will end.

Another way we “get in the way” is by interpreting – with Hawking like certitude – what scripture passages like John 14, mean. What does Jesus mean when he says, “I am the way, the truth and the life?” What does Jesus mean when he says, “No one comes to the father, but through me?” What does Jesus mean when he says, “I will do whatever you ask in my name?”

Now, as someone who’s gone to seminary, and who understands that John’s gospel was written in Greek, and who also knows that Jesus spoke Aramaic, not Greek, and who also realizes that John was written many decades after Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection... Well, I’m more modest than I used to be in thinking I know exactly what Jesus meant by these words. I also ask myself why some of us preference Jesus’ words in John 14 over what he says in Matthew 25 – where Jesus suggests a very different model of how salvation works. And then I look back at John 10, which we explored two weeks ago, and I see there that Jesus says this: “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold.” (v.16)

And do you notice how John himself makes it clear that Jesus’ closest followers struggle to understand what the heck Jesus is saying?

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When we look at texts like this one, I believe our biggest challenge is to not ‘get in the way’ of the one who is ‘the Way.’ And we DO get in the way of the Way when we use Jesus’ words here as a ‘clobber text’; in ways that suggest that we have something akin to ‘privileged insider status.’ Because we know that those who Jesus most unambiguously criticized during his life were those who considered themselves ‘privileged insiders.’

And so the question is, because Jesus is the Way – which I totally affirm -- how do I avoid getting in the way of anyone else coming into the Way? How do I entrust myself more and more to God’s grace and love in such a way that I can most effectively contribute to the extension – to the widening – of God’s family?

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In the book, *The Fidelity of Betrayal*, Philip Harrison shares a story that I find compelling and challenging:

The other day I had a dream. I dreamed I arrived at the gates of heaven, heavy-shut, pure oak, beveled and crafted, glinting sharp in the sunlight. St. Peter stood to greet me; [] “You’re here,” he said.

“I am,” I said.

“Great to see you – been expecting you. Come on in.”

I took a couple of steps forward until, at the threshold, I realized I wasn’t alone. My friends had joined me, but they hovered behind, silently, looking on. [Not all of them were Christians like me and none spoke.] I realized only I could speak.

I stopped. A hesitant St. Peter looked at me, patiently, expectantly. “What about these guys?” I asked him. “My friends. Can they come too?”

“Well,” he replied, “you know the rules. I’m sorry, but that’s the way things are. Only the right ones get in.”

I looked at St. Peter. He seemed genuinely pained by his answer to me. I stood, considering. What should I do? I thought about my reference points, and thought about Jesus and how he treated the outsiders, the unacceptable, the fools, the heretics, the criminal [hung besides him on a cross], and then I knew exactly where I belonged.

“I’ll just stay here too,” I said, taking my one foot out of heaven. And then I saw something like a grin break across St. Peter’s face, and I heard a voice from inside the gates of heaven whisper...

‘At last.’”

...

Could *that* be what Jesus meant when he said “Whatever you ask in my name, I will do”? Could *that* be what Jesus meant when he said that his followers are designed and destined to do greater works even than his?

Now, I am not a universalist. My own beliefs about the scope of salvation are closer to what CS Lewis expresses; that while we know Christ is Savior, we are foolish to think we know the limit or scope his saving work. So, I would invite all of us to resist the impulse to use John 14 as an excuse to judge anyone but ourselves. The fact is that each of us has our hands full just trying to follow Jesus in a way that does not get in his Way.

As the recently deceased Billy Graham said, “It is the Holy Spirit’s job to convict, God’s job to judge, and my job to love.” The minute we forget that our job is to love, we risk falling out of the Way and usurping the job of the Holy Spirit and of God.

(Note: I originally closed this sermon with a question that may had more nuance than I think I could convey... Which happens from time to time!)