



Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

Why else were individuals created but that God, loving all infinitely, should love each differently.

C. S. Lewis

I know many Christians who've struggled, as I have, with this issue of self-love. It seems to run directly counter to Jesus' teaching! Aren't we to "*give up ourselves* to God's service," as the Prayer Book puts it? Aren't we to leave behind our "old man," be conformed to Christ's likeness instead?



Twenty-year Crisis

There came a time, some twenty years after John and I became believers, that we began to feel curiously isolated. For a while after our conversions, we'd savored a wondrous new phenomenon. Community! After being onlookers at the Christian scene for years, we were now participants. It was a thrilling experience to meet a stranger's eyes and know, without a word being said, that he knew the God we knew.

For nearly ten years a small group of Christians met weekly in our living room. We didn't organize it -- people simply showed up, new ones appearing, others departing in our very mobile suburb. Baptists, Methodists, Roman Catholics, a dozen denominations in my first-ever experience of a group in which I didn't have to be the leader or the reporter or wear any other disguise. I'd never imagined such vulnerability in a gathering of people! Or such depth of caring, as we prayed each other through tragedies and triumphs.

The bonding has remained, over time and distance, with each of these individuals. But not the sense of unity: less and less were we encountering fellow Christians whose emphasis was our own. Always lots to admire, lots to

learn from, but no longer any group with which we identified.

Breakfast at Jean's

At last we decided to bring up the matter with the rector of St. Paul's Church on Nantucket Island where friends lend us their home each spring. St. Paul's is a turn-of-the-century Romanesque-revival building, as out of place among the prim wooden structures of that old Quaker whaling port as we were feeling in gatherings of Christians.

In its interior design, though, St. Paul's is all Nantucket. My favorite part of the church is the small side chapel where stained glass windows celebrate whales and gulls, and needlepoint cushions portray a lighthouse or a sandy track through the moors.

In this evocative chapel each morning of the week, the Reverend Herbert Stevens held a service of Holy Communion. Afterward, Herb would occasionally be free to have breakfast with us. Breakfast with him meant Jean's, a no-frills restaurant on the outskirts of town. In the historic center, where streets are cobbled with English stones brought as ballast in whaling ships, are some fresh-flowers-and-tablecloths breakfast places. Herb would have none of them: "They're for summer people." His chosen friends were the farmers and policemen and schoolteachers making a precarious living on the island year-round.

And so we'd drive out to Jean's, park among the pickup trucks, walk past the stools at the counter, and sit at a formica-topped table. John and I would sit, that is. It took Herb a long time to exchange news and greetings with fellow regulars. At last he'd remember that he had a breakfast date with off-islanders, join us at the table, and light a cigarette.

It was across the ketchup bottle at Jean's one morning that we brought up the isolation we were feeling. "Its not that our faith means any less to us," John said. "Speaking for myself, it's never meant more."

I nodded agreement.

"Its just that in groups of Christians," John went on, "we feel like outsiders. I guess the word for us is *lonely*."

Herb signaled the waitress with his empty coffee mug. "John," he said, "if you told me anything else, I'd be worried about you. "Don't you know," he went on, "that each Christian life has its own pattern, different from any other? The longer we walk with God, the more closely we conform to the blueprint he's laid out for us alone, and the less like anyone else we become."

The fried eggs arrived.

"The only problem I have with what you say," Herb said, "is the word you used. You don't have the right one at all. I don't see you as lonely, John and Tib. I see you as unique."

Unique

What a freedom-giving word! Freedom to stop comparing our pilgrim's progress with anyone else's. Freedom to delight in reports of other journeys without devaluing our own or trying to make someone else walk our way.

Like most truths, it was so obvious, once spoken, that we wondered how we'd missed it. God who courts each of us so individually -- who made a churchful of people icily aloof one September Sunday because a couple in the last row needed this -- will he then turn around and blot out the differences he seemed to respect? Is the respect merely a ploy to get us through the door, behind which a divine cookie cutter goes to work turning out identical little Christians?

Of course not. Yet this was precisely the image I'd had, growing up outside that door. All Christians, I'd believed, though I didn't actually know any, were alike. What a releasing thing it's been, since that breakfast at Jean's, to recognize that the Christian walk means just the opposite!

The longer the walk, the more our individuality emerges. Longtime Christians in fact are the least conforming people I know! For God, who doesn't make duplicates even of snowflakes, is filling his heaven with millions upon millions of unique creations.