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I remember when I graduated from high school, way back in 1990, from Marshalltown High School. Over 400 seniors graduated on that day in May. I distinctly remember several times thinking, “Who is *that*?” ...and even turning to the friends around me, who were equally puzzled by these strange students walking across *our* stage...Nevertheless, they were there, much to our surprise and offense. And yet, that day in May, we *all* graduated, in our pastels and our big, permed hair and *all* walked across the same stage, *all* got the same diploma from the same school....but I very clearly remember being surprised by these seeming complete strangers who were, in turns out, classmates. We all had apparently taken different paths but had the same goal, and I am sure, *they* were equally surprised to see some of *us* there that graduation day, back in May, 1990.

This reading from the book of Acts always astounds me, this short yet terrible story of the death of Stephen by stoning....a terrible way to die, slow and agonizingly painful, all because he believed in Jesus Christ. After making a magnificent speech about God's grace, the Pharisees and Sadducees become enraged...and they drag Stephen outside of the city, which we know is where public executions take place. Witnesses who saw Stephen being killed laid their coats at Saul's feet, as a sign of honor and respect. This, of course is the same Saul who later becomes Paul, missionary and apostle of the same Jesus Christ that Stephen believed in. Stephen's blood is on Saul's hands...Stephen and how many others? Many. Saul enjoyed torturing and killing Christians at that point in his life; it was his job, after all, and he was excellent at it.

Anyway.

So, Stephen is killed by the Pharisees and Sadducees, with the approval of Saul/Paul. Those are the players in this story. So, the question is: of these players, *who* will be surprised to see *whom* in heaven, kind of like I was surprised by those apparent strangers on graduation day? Will the Pharisees be surprised to see the Sadducees, who claimed to not even believe in the resurrection? Or, will the Sadducees be surprised to see the Pharisees, who had taught all along that the only way to get to heaven is to lead a perfectly righteous and law-abiding life? Will Stephen be surprised to see both parties that killed him—the Pharisees and the Sadducees—or will he be surprised to see his bloodthirsty arch-enemy Saul in heaven? Will Saul-who-becomes-Paul be surprised to see Stephen, along with all the other innocent people he murdered? Or will he be surprised most of all to find *himself* there, this Saul-who-becomes-Paul, whose hands drip with the blood of the innocent, who calls himself “chief of sinners?” Who is most surprised to find whom in heaven? You can almost imagine the fingers pointing this way and that, everybody saying simultaneously, “I didn't expect to see *you* here.”

It's a funny and scary thing to think about whom you might be most surprised to find in heaven, and funnier and scarier still to consider who might be surprised to find *you* there...

It's kind of like if you're invited to a party, but you're not sure who all is on the guest list. So when you get around other people, you keep quiet and don't say a word, because you don't want them to feel left out if they're not invited. But then you show up to the party and discover that everybody you know is there and you all laugh and say, “If only we'd known everybody was invited, we could have all come together.” We all think we're the only ones invited.

A great metaphor for world religions, no? and the ensuing questions of salvation and heaven, no? A great metaphor for considering space...just how big *is* that stage—big enough for *all* graduates, both friends and strangers? Exactly how gracious *is* that party host—gracious enough to invite not just a select few, but *everybody*? Exactly how forgiving *is* that God—forgiving enough to forgive religious factions that war in his name, Sadducees, Pharisees, Christians, Muslims, whoever? And exactly how big *is* his heaven—is there room enough for the Sauls and the Stephens in this world, big enough for the oppressor and the oppressed, the abuser and the abused? Yes, big enough to include those who would surprise us the most. Yes, gracious enough. Yes, forgiving enough. Yes, big enough.

Won't we all be surprised to see that it is *Jesus Christ* on the throne in heaven, and not a projected image of ourselves? Heaven does not revolve around us, nor does it depend upon our statute of limitations or our insistence that it is finite. And thank God for that. God's love is ever-infinite, enough for all, and his heaven is ever-expanding, room enough for all.