

First Presbyterian Church
Rev. Charles M. Cary
Sermon: "Questions People Ask III: What is Heaven? Who is Eligible?"
July 16, 2017
Luke 23: 39-43

Heaven is the relationship with God that is a pure gift. God seeks this relationship with all. Linda Layne, friend of the Church, poses the question for today. It is about the doctrine of salvation and references the destiny of both Christians and non-Christians. Will I see my Jewish and Muslim and other friends in heaven? I believe in a God who is gracious and cannot believe that He would create a world in which (my words) his own creation is then unwelcome. Questions like this have made it to the New York Times best seller list. One time mega-church pastor Rob Bell from Grand Rapids, Michigan wrote a book *Love Wins* which created a stir, angering many. His main theme – God’s mercy is wide enough for all – even those we judge to be unworthy of heaven! In the first chapter he recounts an experience at an art show at his church where an artist referenced the words of Mahatma Gandhi – the Hindu revolutionary whose practice of non-violence turned this world upside down. Unfortunately someone attached a piece of paper to the reference which declared: “Reality Check (Gandhi) is in Hell!” to which Rob Bell responds – “Huh?? We have confirmation of this?”

My paternal aunt – the late Hilda Clark asks the same question in a bit different manner. Aunt Hilda – who had only an 8th grade education – and bore 10 children – was nevertheless a woman of letters. She shared a poem one time which described her ascent to heaven. She artfully, almost playfully talks about being surprised; she looked around at all the faces of people she never dreamed could be there. Ne’er-do-wells, the unworthy. Sinners guilty of dramatic sins. The neighborhood gossip who represented all that was wrong in her small mining town of Inman, Virginia. One then turns the table to describe the looks on their faces – looks which reveal their surprise at seeing her arrival!

Just what is heaven – and who’s eligible? What does God do with us after we die?

The place to begin is with the scriptures themselves. Their stories...a primary text for this is the interaction between Jesus and one of the criminals who was crucified with him on the day of his death. One can only imagine what this man had done to deserve this fate. He – unlike Jesus, was guilty. Perhaps he had swindled a generation of folks who had trusted in him. In a fit of rage he might have murdered someone in his own family or someone in authority. He might have been one of the zealots who led an insurrection against the Romans who occupied his territory. He may have failed to pay his taxes. He may have been cruel and indifferent. Whatever the criminal alongside Jesus had done – he was now at the point of his execution. While his other colleague sought deliverance – he treated Jesus with the love almost everyone else had forgotten. And he said: “Remember Me! Remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

And what does Jesus say in return? Does He condemn him for his sins? Does He pile on more guilt as though that will inspire his repentance? Does Jesus berate the criminal for his crime? No. What then does He say? He says words which are remarkable in their embrace. The one man in all of Scripture absolutely sure of His destiny is this condemned criminal. Jesus says to Him. “Today you will be with me in paradise!”

Another story that teaches me about the meaning of heaven. In Matthew’s Gospel the Sadducees, a group of religious leaders try to embarrass Jesus with a trick question. Here’s what they asked. A woman out lives her husband, and as law and customs dictate, remarries his brother. This happens again and again – so that she marries and then remarries 7 times! In the Resurrection – whose wife will she be? What a riddle, a conundrum! Their notion would mean that in heaven she would be married to multiple men – a polygamist’s dream come true! How will Jesus get out of this problem?

He does so it broadening the definition. In the resurrection – they neither marry nor are given in marriage! But are like angels! God is not God of the dead, but of the living! The reality of heaven, in other words, is different. It is not identical with the finite worries or concerns of this life. Instead, it will be characterized by such love and joy that we can leave worries of this life behind!

Somewhere along the paths of church history notions of heaven and hell became exploited. Somewhere in the efforts of people with power to keep control over others they began to use the fear of hell and hope of heaven as a carrot on a stick, as a human system of rewards and punishment. Imagine please, the small mind which declared that Mahatma Gandhi is in hell! But the person who wrote that didn't arrive at the conclusion by himself, by herself. Remember popular culture in movies like Pollyanna with Hayley Mills – with Karl Malden playing the role of the preacher – going on and on about sinners – and rarely talking about the mercy of God. Remember the finger pointing gyrations of preachers and teachers who used the Gospel of Jesus Christ to hurt, to ridicule or exclude. One of the most hurtful, shameful illustrations I know is documented in a book *Ethics and Spiritual Care* by Karen LaBacqz and Joe Driskill. Those who use their religious office – their ordination – to abuse others sexually often did so by threatening the abused with hell if they ever spoke up!

I don't agree with everything Rob Bell declares in his book – but of course welcome his attempt to rescue the conversation about heaven and hell from the small-minded and those who seek to manipulate others. In fact, this question in this sermon series wakes me up to the fact that God is not about the business of condemning people to hell as He is in saving us from the hells of our own making, and delivering us to a heaven he makes possible! Further – I believe that Jesus is as much about heaven in the here and now as He is heaven after our death! I believe that this life is not some dress rehearsal for the next. I believe that the Kingdom of Heaven Jesus speaks of goes beyond the limits of time and space, and includes experiences before as well as after our deaths.

I have seen and felt heaven on earth. I have seen and felt heaven the moment I held a child born to parents thought to be infertile. I have seen and felt heaven on earth when a surgeon told an anxious family – your loved one is going to make it. I have seen and felt heaven on earth when an aged person greets death with the peace and confidence of Jesus Christ, the peace and confidence that passes all understanding. I have seen and felt heaven on earth at the dedication of a new Habitat Home in Collier County, Florida – a house owned with pride and thanksgiving by a single mother and her three children. Heaven is that relationship with God which is so much deeper and wider than immediate dimensions of life. It's a relationship that death cannot – will not destroy. We have it on good authority that even the worst of the worst experience it: Jesus Remember Me when you come into your Kingdom! Today you will be with me in Paradise.

I have also seen hell on earth. I have seen and experienced that state of God-forsakenness in which evil appears to triumph. I have seen hell in the anguish of a mother unable to feed her infant. I have seen hell in the desperation of a drug addict who knows not where to turn in order to feed his habit- and destroys the life of another in order to do so! I have read about hell and its conditions in the description of the Holocaust/ Shoan! I have read about hell and its participants when in one of the financial scandals – a widow lost it all to the greed of a once reputable money-manager. I have seen and felt the sting of hell when a 35 year old father of two beautiful daughters succumbed to Leukemia, and was buried out of the Westhampton sanctuary!

Think about it. Think about the Scriptures themselves. Did not Jesus talk more about heaven and hell this side of the grave than beyond it? The Kingdom of heaven is like the woman who lost her money, then turns the house upside down until she finds it – and rejoices for all to hear! The Kingdom of heaven is like that. And it is like so much more!

What is heaven? That relationship with God that quickens our faith and gives us courage in the face of whatever we fear. Heaven is the state of God's presence that inspires unity when there is discord, and hope when there is despair. Heaven is an experience of continuous singing where they neither marry nor are given in marriage. Where all are one!

This life is short. One of these days I will die. My eyes will close. My lungs will collapse. My heart will stop beating, and the electricity in my nervous system will cease. The thoughts in my head will give way to a song or two. Let there be a service testifying to God's goodness: Cut any hyperbole about me.

I trust the decision about my fate to God alone, not to a body of human beings who pretend to know such things as who is saved or who is damned. My faith tells me it will be God's grace alone which determines my fate, my destiny. It's the same grace which determined the fate of the criminal alongside Jesus, and the woman of

multiple marriages who made it to heaven, only to realize that in heaven they neither marry nor are given in marriage but are like the angels above. This image is descriptive not prescriptive. The Kingdom of heaven is so much more than my finite understanding will allow me to imagine. Rather than something to fear – it is something to greet with confidence.

There is a scene in the movie “Amadeus” – when the renowned composer Antonio Salieri – as a boy kneels before God and tries to make a bargain. “Lord, make me a great composer! Let me celebrate your glory through music! And be celebrated myself! Make me famous throughout the world, dear God! Make me immortal!” So- what will God get for doing him this favor? “In return I will give you my chastity. My industry, my deepest humility every hour of my life. I will help my fellow (man & woman) all my days!”

God does not negotiate the deal. In Amadeus = God proceeds to give musical genius to Salieri’s nemesis – a young brat named Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart! Later as an old man, Salieri ends up being bitter! Bitter because God had not blessed him with what he thought he deserved as one of the saved or redeemed.

Our God is not a deal maker. Instead, he is a savior. Not counting our sins against us, but giving us all of heaven that we need. Heaven is God’s gift – not the reward we somehow deserve. It is a gift God offers everyone. From the most to the least. Who will we see? A long line of folks with the crucified criminal rejoicing. We will see lots of folks.

The final hymn today says in song what I have been trying to say in words. “Amazing Grace – How Sweet the Sound!” Composed by John Newton – same Englishman turned preacher and composer who wrote the hymn “Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken!”

John Newton was at one time involved in the slave trade. Later in life he was compelled to see the errors of his ways, and he published a pamphlet “Thoughts on the Slave Trade”. In short – he ascribes all glory and honor to our maker for helping him see the light and truth of the Gospel. There is no pride nor is there triumphalism in his hymn. Instead, he describes what we all know: God’s goodness is amazing, and it extends to all – even to a wretch like me! On this side of the grave – the slave trader deserves little – we would think. But think again.

Where is heaven? Its’ the presence of God on both sides of the grave. A presence death cannot defeat. Who gets in? Who’s eligible? With God, all things are possible. Amen.