

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for the Sixth Sunday of Easter, May 13, 2012
Lessons: Isaiah 25:6-9 and I Corinthians 15:12-20

AND THE LIFE EVERLASTING

I have urged you not to think of faith in Jesus Christ as the means for getting into heaven. Jesus came to get heaven into us and transform this world into the kingdom of God. The creation is loved by its Creator, and this world is the place in which we receive life from God and develop into the people we become. Jesus calls us and enables us to become the people God created us to be. His concern is who we are in relation to God and each other, and Christianity has no right to reduce his concern to a mere question of what happens to us after we die. Eternal life is not a reward for good behavior or faith, either. Eternal life is life in relationship with the eternal God, the new life shared with us by Jesus who gave his life for us, to restore us to God and to each other.

If we ask Jesus how to live eternally, he answers, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.” But we ask, perhaps with some frustration or dismay, “No, how do I get into heaven and live there forever?” but he has already told us how to live eternally, starting now. The real question is already answered, and Jesus now says to us, “Trust me, follow me, and live my new life with me.” This is the life everlasting – life we live as sisters and brothers of Jesus, the crucified and risen Christ; life he shares with us so we can live it his way.

Okay, let’s talk a little about heaven. What are we picturing? Forget the clouds, harps, halos, and wings. Think about the nature of the “place.” People respect each other and care more strongly about the other’s well-being than about their own. The rule of life is the law of love. Forgiveness that heals torn relationships is highly prized, while revenge is rejected as unsatisfying and offensive. Money holds little value unless, perhaps, it is shared, although even then it is suspect as something tainted that tempts people to evil – Jesus calls it “the unrighteous mammon.” Power is a word that makes little sense except, maybe, as the ability to feel compassion, offer comfort, and overcome adversity in ways that make life better for all. The idea of controlling and using other people for one’s own benefit has no place here. The concept of being better or more important than someone else makes no sense in heaven. Why would anyone even want to be better or more important than others? One who is loved, respected, and even cherished has no need for such pretensions. “Influence” here is a word for helping and supporting. Wisdom is not cleverness about acquiring wealth or getting ahead but insight that makes caring effective. Equality of worth

among people is assumed here. How could it be otherwise? No one is scorned or put down so that someone else's ego can be inflated. There is no joy here, no satisfaction, in being right at someone else's expense. Advantage is something given not taken.

When heaven is pictured this way, who on earth even still wants to get into it? Most of this world's successful, powerful people would hate it because it would strip them of all their pride, power, and prestige. Such things have no place in heaven. Here it is better to suffer than to make someone else suffer. In this place, this realm of God, being male is not better than being female, and no grouping of people done by prejudice or disgust endures here or even comes to mind.

People say, "You can't take it with you." They mean money and all that money buys, but in that sense the truth of the saying is obvious. The deeper and more significant truth, however, is that, "You can't take it with you," applies to prejudices, hatreds, the benefits of injustices, and all the pretensions of the human ego that empower one person to feel superior to another. Those things that make this earth a hell for some – indeed, for many – have no place in heaven and must be left behind.

I hope we see and understand that the passage to heaven is not death but God's love for all of us. Eternal life is belonging with Jesus Christ to God and living in God's love.

But what about people who don't know Jesus Christ or who have been turned off by his followers or who have followed another religion or none at all? Does God hate and reject them? No, the Creator and Giver of life loves the creatures made to share God's image and live consciously and responsibly in God's love. Am I preaching predetermined universal salvation? No, I am not. There is evil in us and in our world. Certainly the heaven I have done my best to describe would be offensive and repulsive to some. But I don't know the outcome or understand all the ways and means of God's salvation accomplished in Jesus Christ. In the most exclusive-sounding of the four Gospels, Jesus says, "I have sheep of other folds," and, "I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all to myself." Do I, by my theology or doctrine, get to make the rules and set the limits for God's redemptive love? No, I do not. So, while I do not and must not preach universal salvation – as though all of human life and history were just a game God had already won but was playing out anyway, as though Jesus' life and self-giving death held no meaning and confronted us with no challenge or demand, as though there were no difference that matters between Francis of Assisi and Adolph Hitler or Joseph Stalin, as though faith meant nothing – neither do I or dare I try to impose my requirements and restrictions upon the grace of God triumphant in the resurrection of the one crucified in disgrace.

Paul writes to the Corinthians:

If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.

Eternal life is first and most of all a quality not a quantity. It is relational not privatized existence in the self. It is life shared within, by, for, and in terms of the redemptive love of God. But it is also eternal, everlasting, because, as Paul writes also, “Love never ends.” God’s love for us is faithful, steadfast, and stronger than any other force in the universe. We are not immortal, nor is any part of us immortal. When we die, all of us dies utterly, just as Jesus died utterly. That’s what I understand us to mean when we say, “He descended into hell.” By the full measure of what it is to be dead and gone, he was dead and gone. But God remembers us, and when God calls us by name, life answers, and death cannot stop it. That’s why the Bible speaks of God as the one who calls into being things that are not. That’s the power of redemptive love, and there is no greater force or reality.

Mary Ella and Jim, we welcome you into our community of faith in Jesus Christ, of our admittedly partial and often faltering trust in his redeeming love. You know us well enough to realize we don’t even pretend to have all the answers or to be doing this thing called faith in just the right way. Thank you for joining us in this journey of faith and this adventure of being a church together. Personally, I am very grateful that you and others have chosen to join this church as I am leaving it. Your choice is to me a sign of hope for this church I have loved and served – not perfectly, to be sure. I have my regrets and frankly cannot imagine twenty-six-plus years of pastoral ministry with no regrets, no mistakes, no failings, but I have cared all along, and I give thanks for all the signs of ongoing life, friendship, growth, and pursuit of faith’s vision.

It’s also Mothers’ Day, which is one of those I sometimes call Hallmark holidays, but this one is observed in honor of a relationship through which God entrusts children to the care and stewardship of parents and faith communities so that learning to live in God’s love can begin with living in the embrace of human love. That’s special.

We grieve our separation from people we have loved. We know they were not perfect, and we were not perfect with them, either, but love covers many imperfections, overcoming both regrets and resentments. Jesus tells us to trust God and trust him, also, and in that trust to live in his love. We’re in this life of faith together, and we commend each other to God’s care every day, including the final day of life for someone we love. Trust God not to let go. Think of loved ones when we stand and affirm in trust, “I believe in the resurrection of the body – the distinct and beloved person – and the life everlasting.” Amen.