

“KNOCKING ON HEAVEN’S DOOR”

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Mark Hostetter

The First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York
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Scripture: Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52

Good morning, everyone!

Today’s a fun day in the lectionary. It’s always fun to hear stories that Jesus told, parables that he used to illustrate his teachings. And today is all parables, all the time. Six of them, all adding up to a collection of images, snapshots if you will, that Jesus gives us – this time, in order to help us gain some idea of what heaven is like.

These parables would have struck a familiar chord with Jesus’ listeners. They were stories that everyone could relate to, stories of everyday life, whose message couldn’t be missed. We were joking at a recent staff meeting about writing our own modern-day parables from our own experiences. Maybe we’d be teaching the Parable of the Always Missing Double-A Batteries, or in our quarantine isolation, the Parable of the Shuttered Hair Salon and the Parable of the Last Toilet Paper Roll. Maybe the Parable of the Delayed YouTube Link, or the Parable of the Viral TikTok.

Jesus’ topic for these parables today was, of course, that eternal and ultimate question for humans for millennia: what is heaven like, what can we expect about the reign of God? These parables would be of interest to everyone, just as they are today, to everyone who thinks deeply about the meaning of our human existence and of their own mortality.

Looking closer at today’s verses, it’s a little hard to discover at first when we hear them read, but these stories, these parables, of heaven are sort of paired into groups of two. A little structure to these mini-sermons of Jesus.

They start off with two parables of growth and hope. The parable of the small mustard seed that grows into a tree, and the parable of the speck of yeast that leavens so much bread, both showing what immense outcomes can arise from very small beginnings, and God’s miraculous activity that sometimes starts with the smallest of sparks.

The next two are parables of joy and meaning. The parable of the hidden treasure that is found in a field, and the parable of the pearl, both point to sometimes hidden value that, once discovered, leads to joyous, lifelong and total commitment.

The final two are parables of responsibility. The parable of the fishing net and the parable of the householder not only demonstrate that God is open to all seekers, that truth can be found in both old and new, but also that God – and we – need to be vigilant in discerning the good from the bad, and putting the good in our baskets to keep and throwing out the bad. And of course, Jesus

points to the long-familiar consequences of evil, referencing back to familiar old testament words and images, visions of furnaces of fire, and wailing and weeping and gnashing of teeth.

I smile when I think of that last image, when I'm reminded of a story of the very last night of an old-time revival meeting, when the evangelist was going strong. His topic was eternal damnation, and he preached with his usual self-confidence, definitive answers, and this time, with fire and brimstone on the need to flee from the wrath that was to come. "On that last dread day," the preacher exclaimed, "on that last dread day of judgement, there will be weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth!" In a rear pew stood up an elderly woman. "Pastor," she said haltingly, "I ain't got no teeth." "Madam," the preacher confidently shouted back, "teeth will be provided."

Well, teeth or no teeth, heaven is as much on our modern minds as it was 2,000 years ago. When I found out about these lectionary verses for today, the song "Knock, Knock, Knocking on Heaven's Door" has been running through my mind as I thought about today's message. We love the version by Bob Dylan, who wrote it of course, but we all have our favorite covers – Guns & Roses, Eric Clapton, Gabrielle, David Sanborn

In these troubled times, four months and counting from mid-March, I've been thinking about a new kind of FOMO – Fear of Missing Out – that has seemed to sneak into our everyday lives. It's not a fear of missing out on something we've never yet had, but rather missing out on the little pieces of heaven, the part of our lives in earlier, ordinary times, that we took for granted, that we now appreciate and dearly miss in these not so ordinary days.

We set up a socially-distanced walk-by "hello" with friends in the park, and we miss so much the ability to give hugs and kisses on the cheek. We gather on Zoom for those landmark birthdays that end in a "5" or a "0" but we miss so much the chance to connect deeply like we would sitting on a couch at a party. Those little slices that we now long for, those little glimpses of heaven, those personal intersections that remind us we love and that we are loved, whether it be missing a Memorial Day family picnic or even shaking hands at coffee hour after church. So many things we all miss, things we now maybe think of as a little part of heaven to come again, hopefully soon.

I guess heaven might not be what we once thought, and our ideas of heaven might change with our times and our personal situations. I know after a week on a wilderness camping trip, heaven seems so close just thinking about a hot shower and a real bed. And I suppose in the future, our idea of the specifics of heaven may not be what we might think now. In these not so ordinary times, life may shake our ideas about heaven, and maybe too about the ideas of good and evil that we relied on in more ordinary times.

Ideas about heaven are certainly all around us. Movies, books, television series, it's actually a challenge to find something that doesn't touch on heaven or hell or eternity or the afterlife. Every issue of the New Yorker has a cartoon. There are comedies, horror films, even self-proclaimed documentaries. This idea of what heaven might be like is a big topic for us humans. And has been for thousands of years.

Some Christians have a particular notion, proclaiming with specificity just what heaven is like and all the rules and regulations the faithful need to follow in order to gain that golden MetroCard to allow those turnstiles of the pearly gates to swoosh open. Other preachers, I guess more-so in our own main-line tradition, other preachers stay as far away from the topic as they possibly can, maybe out of fear they'll be lumped in with those crazy fire and brimstone televangelist fanatics.

Well, we know that looking to our faith may give us a compass. Yet there are so many approaches our theologians and Christian scholars have taken, so many different perspectives as we look through this glass darkly. So much has been debated, probably more than any other topic since it's at the core of the deepest questions we ask, at the center of our deepest fears.

Some have a more abstract idea of being close to God, and to those we love -- a perfect union with God and with each other. And the alternative -- the non-heaven -- is a self-selected decision to separate from God, to separate from the love for God and with each other, that leads to eternal unhappiness. OK, that might be an approach to give us insight, but from there it just gets a lot fuzzier. And we humans, with our limited view of ultimate truths, begin to tie ourselves in knots.

If heaven is the perfect union with God and with others, and hell is the absence, the separation, of that union, how and why would anyone chose such an eternity of torment? Is our free-will determination of destination final -- can someone eventually realize the torment of separation and change one's mind and one's path? Or the question of how can a God of limitless love allow for such separation? Does a compassionate God just take those people who are in such torment and put them out of their misery? How do we avoid being bored in an eternity of bliss? And while our notion of bodily resurrection certainly keeps the idea of our individuality intact after we die, what does that mean in eternity for our specific love we have for individuals, for children, for partners, for friends?

It's easy to get caught up in the debate, and that might lead to even more confusion and unease as we long to know just what our God has in store. So maybe we need to go back to our basics, back to our primary source material, and cut through all that speculation and debate. Just what does Jesus have to say about heaven in today's parables?

The idea of heaven that the first century listeners who Jesus was speaking to in these parables, came from the ancient Jewish notions that God's kingdom was an achievable heaven. It wasn't that the faithful went up to a heaven somewhere else; it was that heaven came down to earth, a new Jerusalem, a dwelling of God with a new creation. Remember that Jesus told these parables in the time of the Roman Empire, the Roman domination in an empire that stretched far and wide and affected every aspect of daily life. In contrast, Jesus is talking about God's coming empire. For those discouraged by the destructiveness of human institutional structures, for those who think that God is absent and ineffective, for the people suffering, who cry out their laments "O God, how long?" -- these six parables give messages of hope and joy and responsibility as they point to God's empire to come, as they point to heaven, heaven that is an eternity of God's reign here on earth.

So what does that concept imply then, what does it mean for lives of listeners. If, in fact, heaven is instead a place that's set apart from the world, somewhere else, then what good does it do to work to make the world a better place? But, if God is going to make a new creation, to do what God did in Jesus at the resurrection, to bring God's faithful back to a new reality – then aren't all faithful called to work towards making that new reality happen?

Our gospels provide a practical, rather than a theological approach to heaven. Jesus parables in Matthew provide six different metaphors for heaven, images like the seed, the yeast, the treasure in a field, the pearl. They talk more about context, about process, about what life outside of heaven might be like. And those early theologians like Paul and John, they too focus in many ways on the process – the unusual nature of the resurrected body, the spiritual body, in the experience of the resurrected Jesus, and in the final battles of good and evil in Revelation's images. Jesus wasn't giving specifics, he was setting the scene. It's really only when we get to St Augustine and the medieval church that heaven as a place, rather than a process or a way of being, took hold.

And whatever our personal feelings about heaven may be, our own visions of life everlasting, there's a lot of inspiration in these short little parables today. They all give hope, on a topic that's so important to everyone. But it is clear, in the words of Jesus and all those early church theologians, as the idea of heaven took on ultimate importance, was that it's about connection with God, and it's about hope in the ultimate triumph of God even from the smallest and most unusual places, light for the future from the depths of darkness.

So what's heaven like? Well, a bit of humbleness is always good here. Who of us can truly know? But of course, we do have what Jesus has told us. And his message is not so much on exactly what we can expect, but rather on how we should think and act in order to make heaven, how to make the kingdom of God, ever more real in our lives. So let's look at little closer at these parables.

First, the two parables of growth and hope. Heaven, Jesus says, grows from the smallest seed. The mustard seed is just so small, even smaller than the poppy seeds on our morning Lenny's bagel, and it grows inevitably into a bush, a tree, 10 or 12 or 14 feet high, that takes over everything and provides nesting for birds, nurturing life rather than destroying it.

From the tiniest grains of yeast, heaven causes live-giving bread to rise. Rather than a negative image for leaven – remember that there are other bible yeast metaphors that refer to impurity – here Jesus shocks his listeners with an almost unimaginable image. The three measures of flour that the parable has the woman adding that tiny pinch of yeast to, would have been enough to bake bread for 150 people. Again, from tiny, imperceptible beginnings, come monumental results.

And then the parables of discovery and joy. Heaven is a treasure in a field, it's a pearl in an oyster, found in a place - once we know where it is - that we should devote all of ourselves to. Heaven, God's empire, is about discovery, joy, and then most importantly, action. The joy of the discovery of the treasure in the field or the pearl of great value, is what drives these people in the

parable to do all they can to preserve it. It's not duty, or fear of condemnation, that motivates them, but rather a call to joy and a response to discovery.

And in the final two, the parables of responsibility, heaven takes work, separating the good from the bad, and finding good in all places, in both the old and the new. It's about being open to God's work, knowing that God's openness, God's radical inclusivity, is fundamental to our faith, and that good can be found anywhere. And it's not so much about God separating the bad fish from the good, but rather about our being vigilant, our taking the responsibility to recognize evil and taking action to throw the bad away and reject evil. It's our responsibility to call out those who place self over service, who forgive cruelty as the price of profit, who blind themselves to the suffering of the non-privileged. Finding heaven, making heaven real, is up to us.

So Jesus does give us the roadmap to heaven, the landmarks along the way. Hope in the face of hopelessness. Massive success from the smallest seeds. Joy in the discovery of God's treasure and a call to act on that discovery. Our responsibility to be open to all, and at the same time to recognize evil and call it out, to name it, for the evil that it is.

So one final story today, about an 95 year-old woman standing in front of St. Peter at the gates to heaven. She had been married to four husbands over her lifetime, her wedding to her fourth husband just one year ago. St. Peter asked about the occupation of her newly acquired husband, and she replied that he owned a funeral home. Curious about the other husbands, St. Peter also asked about their occupations. The woman stated that her first husband was a banker. The second one was a circus master. The third one was a minister.

Puzzled by her answers, St. Peter replied, "None of these people have anything in common! Why did you marry these – a banker, a circus man, a minister, and a mortician?" The woman thought for a minute, then said that she married number one for the money, two for the show, three to get ready, and four to go.

As we go about our new routines in these not-so-ordinary times, let's remember these simple parables from today, as we share our visions of a new order, a new Jerusalem, as we share our good news of growth and hope, of joy and discovery, of action and responsibility, as we keep knock, knock, knocking on heaven's door.

AMEN.

BENEDICTION: Go into the world to be those who are patient and kind, and willing to be the seed and the yeast, the fisher and the householder, the ones who can see the treasure and the pearl that our God offers. Go into the world with that message in our hearts, the message of growth and hope, the message of discovery and joy, the message of responsibility and action. Bring the Good News of God's love wherever you go. May God's people and God's love go with you always. AMEN.