

Date: August 26, 2007

SUNDAY: Ordinary 21

SERMON: The Gate of Heaven

Texts: Hebrews 12:14-29; Luke 13:10-17, 22-30

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Here's one for all those of you who spend significant amounts of time strolling or riding around lovely green pastures hitting little white balls with long sticks, and frequently saying bad words when the little white ball doesn't go where you want it to.

A church member who was a devout golfer came to talk to his pastor one day. "Tell me, Pastor," he demanded, "are there going to be golf courses in heaven? I gotta know."

"Well," said the minister, "I'm not really sure, but I'll pray about it and see if God will tell me the answer."

The next Sunday, when the service ended, the golfer cornered the minister again. "Did you get the answer, Reverend? Are there going to be golf courses in heaven?"

Well, yes George," the minister replied, "I did get the answer. I've got good news and bad news."

"Tell me the good news first," George said.

"The good news is that, yes, there are golf courses in heaven. Beautiful courses, where the sun is always shining but never too hot, the rough is not too deep, there are no sand traps, no water hazards larger than a mud puddle, and you never have to wait in line to tee off."

"Hey, that's great!" exclaimed the golfer excitedly. "But what's the bad news?"

"Well, the bad news is that St. Peter has you scheduled to tee off this coming Tuesday morning at 8:00."

We've probably all heard similar jokes about heaven, which indicates, perhaps, how fascinated we are with the whole question of what, if anything, lies beyond. In fact, we appear to be the only form of life on earth that is capable

of anticipating our own death and speculating about what might lie beyond. Usually whatever we enjoy most or what we recognize as the best experiences in life, we project onto our ideas of heaven (hence the golfer's concern about whether there will be golf courses in heaven). Similarly, whatever we dislike or fear or disapprove of tends to get projected onto our ideas of hell. (Perhaps that's why there are so many jokes about the difficulties of lawyers getting into heaven.)

In Western culture, at least, these questions about our ultimate end and the images of whatever might lie beyond have been shaped and influenced by the biblical writings. If you've spent any time in an art museum or visited almost any of the great Gothic churches of Europe, you'll have seen numerous depictions of the Last Judgment. These artistic depictions of the Last Judgment are all fairly similar and stylized. Almost all are based on the story in Matthew's gospel of Christ the Judge separating the sheep from the goats, the righteous from the unrighteous. So Christ is always depicted in the center, at the top, seated on a glorious throne. To his right are the righteous who are being admitted to heaven, and on Christ's left, those that are destined for the other place. Most of the artists didn't waste much effort on their depictions of the righteous entering heaven; on the whole they're a pretty uninteresting lot. Most of them have their hands folded in an attitude of piety, with either beatific or bored expressions on their faces. But the unrighteous on the left, who are being excluded from heaven are another story altogether. That's where many artists put all of their creative energy. Liars are having their tongues torn out by demons, misers are being hanged with their bags of gold around their necks. Murderers are being stabbed with an imaginative variety of sharp objects. You get the picture— fascinating, but perhaps not exactly what one wants to see just before going to bed at night. In a more credulous age, it's understandable that people might be terrified into staying on the straight and narrow, even if by doing so they risked the blandness of choirs of

angels and the company of other boring people.

While few today would find such depictions of what awaits us at death either credible or salutary, that question still keeps coming up, even in so unheavenly a place as Hollywood. Think of how many movies have been made in the last decade where at least one of the main characters is an angel. At least one of the new TV shows this coming season will feature a cast of angels; I can't remember it's name, but I've been seeing commercials for it.

This seemingly universal fascination with what may lie beyond death, whether depicted in the biblically-inspired Last Judgment scenes from the Middle Ages or in the trivialized and commercialized versions of Hollywood, arises, I believe, out of our concern about the meaning of our lives now. Or as one wag put it, we not only want to know whether there is life after death; we want to know whether there's life after birth. Why are we here? What are the consequences of our behavior? Does it ultimately matter whether I please myself or please others or please God (if there is a God to be pleased or displeased)? Is it possible to know true freedom? Is peace of mind, and peace among human beings a real possibility? Am I loved? Can I love others? These sorts of questions are what theologian Paul Tillich called "ultimate concerns." And it is these ultimate concerns that lie behind our fascination with what may await us beyond the doorway of death, our images of heaven, or its opposite, hell.

It's an expression of those ultimate concerns that we find in the question asked in our Gospel lesson today, "*Lord, will only a few be saved?*" In this section of Luke's gospel, he shows us Jesus being criticized and taken to task by the most upright and religious people of his day. They've upbraided him for healing a woman crippled with a spinal deformity on the Sabbath, a day that has been set apart for rest and worship. It's one of the most important commands in the whole of the Mosaic law, and

still is today, both for religiously observant Jews and even for many Christians: Six days are for human work; the seventh is for resting in acknowledgment that even our ability to work the other six is a gift from God. To honor the Sabbath, therefore, is to honor God and ourselves as God's creation. Jesus responds by calling them a bunch of hypocrites because they care more about preserving the honor of God by keeping the Sabbath than they do by caring for the needs of a woman who's been among them for eighteen years and has never heard a caring or healing word spoken to her. So their question about whether only a few will be saved is understandable. If the morally and spiritually upright people are being called on the carpet for obeying God's commands, then what hope is there for everyone else. And Jesus' reply confirms that heaven may be a smaller target than we think, "*Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able.*"

I daresay most of us have already discovered how narrow that door to the Kingdom is, haven't we? Anyone who's ever tried to live up to the best that they know, only to fail, understands at a very deep personal level how narrow is that door to the fullness of life. Ask the person who's tried to quit smoking repeatedly and just can't shake free of the addiction. Ask the person who's gone into marriage with high hopes and the best of intentions, only to see those hopes shattered because they chose to be unfaithful or because they were too self-absorbed to sustain a commitment. Ask the person who holds a good, respectable corporate job, earning a good living, and who is forced to make business decisions that are sharply in conflict with his or her own sense of what is ethical. Oh, yes, we know how narrow the door to the fullness of life is, don't we? It's not easy to get there, is it?

Jesus replies to the question by talking about how we miss opportunity after opportunity

to walk enter the door of the kingdom when it stands open. It's like people invited for dinner, but who stand outside the house kibitzing while the meal inside is on the table getting cold, and finally, when the host who has invited them to the meal has accepted that no one wants to come in and eat, finally shuts the door and goes to bed. Only then, do the invited guests start knocking and wanting admittance. And then they're surprised that they've missed their opportunity for a place at the feast. Life is serious business, Jesus is saying, and we have to pay attention to the invitation to really live it in a way that leads to its full richness and purpose. Otherwise, we may miss that crucial moment. Getting through the door is of ultimate concern.

How do we make sure that we don't miss the opportunity? We don't stumble through the narrow door to the kingdom by accident. The invitation to enter comes to those who are listening for it and striving to pay attention. All the great spiritual giants of the faith down through the centuries have agreed that the primary reason why we should pray is that prayer is a way of paying attention to our ultimate concerns. Prayer is an act of listening for the invitation to walk through the open door and join the banquet. Prayer is an opening of the eyes of our hearts to see the right path to follow—the path that leads to life in all its fullness. It is the way we strip away the clutter and the hurry and the insulating buffer of all the things in our daily lives that distract us in order to seek the one thing we truly desire—the gate of heaven.

If our Gospel lesson speaks of our life's work as “striving to find the narrow door,” the author of our epistle lesson from Hebrews pictures life as a pilgrimage between two mountains, Mt. Sinai where Israel heard God's voice as though it were thunder, and were terrorized by it, and Mt. Zion, the hill on which Jerusalem is built, and which, in both the Jewish and Christian imagination has always symbolized heaven or the goal of human existence. It is a

pilgrimage guided by listening to a voice which speaks to us and guides us on the journey. In the epistle writer's words, it is a pilgrimage from “what can be touched” to “what cannot be shaken.” Or from the transient to the eternal, from that which is illusory to that which is really real.

“For you have not come to what can be touched [or destroyed]. . .” Rather, *“You have come to Mt. Zion, and the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God, to a myriad of angels in festal assembly, and to the church of the first-born enrolled in heaven, and to the God who is judge of all, and to the spirits of just persons already made perfect, and to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant. . . Let us give thanks, then, that we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken.”*

Do you get the tense of his verbs? “You have come. . . we are receiving.” This passage, like Jesus' statements about the kingdom of God being among us, suggests that heaven is not something that only awaits us off in the distant future beyond the doorway of death, but heaven is something that begins here and now in the very midst of our journey of discipleship, a truth that C. S. Lewis affirms in what I regard as one of his finest works, *The Great Divorce*. In it he says, *“Earth, I think, will not be found by anyone to be in the end a very distinct place. I think earth, if chosen instead of Heaven, will turn out to have been all along, only a region in Hell: and earth, if put second to Heaven, to have been from the beginning, a part of Heaven itself.”*

That's why it takes persistence and paying attention and courage to find the narrow gate. We are always tempted to put earth first, to serve our own needs first, to care for ourselves and our own interests first, to give our hearts to things that “can be touched” instead of to the things “that cannot be shaken.” And when we do, we risk missing the gate of heaven. Our epistle writer gives us a clue to how we can put the kingdom of heaven first so that we can find that

narrow door. If prayer is the key to finding the door and hearing the invitation, the way we enter the door, the way we receive the unshakeable kingdom is to pay attention to our relationships with other people—in the practice and maintenance of a community of mutuality and peace and love. *“Pursue peace with everyone and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble.* It’s how we pay attention to our relationships with others that makes the difference whether we get hell or heaven. In Jean Paul Sartre’s famous play *No Exit*, the characters conclude that hell is other people. And they’re right; for the self-absorbed and self-centered, hell is other people. But for those who are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, it’s just the opposite: heaven is other people.

A man who had just arrived at the Pearly Gates told St. Peter that he was so grateful to be in such a glorious place, that he wished he could have just a glimpse of hell to help him appreciate his good fortune even more. St. Peter gladly obliged, and took him to a room where a long banquet table, extended as far as the eye could see, laden with the richest and most sumptuous feast the man had ever seen. But then he noticed that all the people at the table were starving and emaciated and weeping with frustration. When the man asked for an explanation, St. Peter said that the people were only permitted to eat the food with chopsticks that were four feet long. They could pick up the food, but the chopsticks were too long to get it into their mouths, so in spite of the banquet set before them they were starving.

Then, in the room next door, St. Peter showed the man saw an identical table, laden with what appeared to be identical food, but all the people around the table were well-fed, conversing happily, laughing in the pleasure of each other's company. The man asked “So are they using different utensils or what? St. Peter

replied, “No, They’re also using four-foot long chopsticks.” At that the new arrival was puzzled. Then why are the people in hell starving, but these are thriving and happy? St. Peter said, “The difference is, that in heaven, they feed each other.”