

The Lord's Prayer: Our Unity

Fourth Sunday After Pentecost
7 July 2019

Rev. Nancy Lincoln Reynolds

Isaiah 64:1-2
Romans 5: 3-5

Resilience and Resurrection

Today we are continuing our series on the Lord's Prayer with the segment *on earth as it is in heaven*.



Heaven and Earth by Kongtrul Jigme Namgy

On earth as it is in heaven seems to be an appropriate goal for living...to have things be “here” like they are “there.” “There,” heaven, is usually depicted as a place of peace and perfect absence of all the things that plague mortality and humanity: hatred, bigotry, greed, selfishness, revenge...the list is long. And heaven houses relationships that are loving and “blessed.” In heaven everyone falls under that heading of “our” in “our Father” with which Susan first began this series wherein all are included equally, and therefore, heaven is not only a place of peace but of justice and righteousness.

And so, of course, it makes sense that *on earth as it is in heaven* would be the goal of our living. We should welcome “heaven on earth.” The problem is...it's just not like that here.

This week in the Messenger—an updating of events email communication that Woods Church sends out to the congregation each week, I invited you all to send me examples of your glimpses of heaven. We also discussed in the Wednesday Bible study what aspects of heaven might be or should be present on earth. You all offered up some excellent observations.

Many of you referenced nature: visuals of rainbows, sunrises and sunset scenarios, budding flowers and puppies; sightings of wildlife and birds' nests created in hanging plants; children...new life as a promise of hope or, as Lee Schatz shared, heaven's dynamics may be witnessed “In the eyes of babies at the crisis nurseries of our mission partner, Ministry of Hope, in Malawi.” Many of you imaged such personal and individually witnessed pleasures.

Along with the gifts of nature, most also focused upon relationship...with family, friends, and strangers...and interactions with others where the goal is to care and to learn in the presence of inclusivity rather than exclusivity. Relationship and respect for others such that we view even the presence of God in someone else. This is called love, actually, love as Jesus envisioned and lived it: agape (the Greek word for love) that calls us to each other in compassion and in welcome.

Heaven is a place we go for eternal life ...if, in fact, heaven is a “place”...a place of promise that suggests finding joy and love eternally. We may discover this...these aspects of heaven...in the things I have just named/that you shared: individual experiences and interactive experiences; relationship with self and relationship with others.

Finding joy and love can be experienced as aspects of heaven on earth in a couple of ways: first, individually, as in this clip sent to me of Jim Williams finding joy and love alone in the music garden outside the counseling and care center.

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1bzBBjeLROvrXayaUa1nkmH56BON2e01d/view>

Second, joy and love can be seen as an aspect of heavenly dynamic in the context of others as in this scene from Love Actually.

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1RGMtQtgsSqDhHoIFEtIJdITqk5zzfJB/view>

Just as an aside, there is some interesting data from research on the brain that suggests a strong correlation in terms of the impact between experiencing something and witnessing someone else experiencing that same something. We are that hard-wired to each other.

It is part of why we can react so negatively to what heaven on earth is NOT...and I’m sorry to name this particular crisis because it does carry some political implication but, regardless of your politics, it’s just not possible to be okay with these drawings by children at the border...drawings that indicate a disregard for heavenly dynamics. These things are clearly what heaven is NOT...and they get in the way of our experiencing earth’s mirroring of heaven. These are drawings the children made of their current living situations.



Reports on border crisis continue to implicate children and, as one pediatrician said upon examining some of the children, “I can only explain it by trauma, because that is such an unusual behavior,” she said. Dr. Sevier had brought along Mickey Mouse toys to break the ice, and the kids seem to enjoy playing with them. Yet none resisted, she said, when she took them away at the end of the exam. “At some point,” Sevier mused, “you’re broken and you stop fighting.”

Heavenly dynamics just do not exist in these scenarios where children are mistreated and traumatized. Heavenly dynamics just don’t exist anywhere that we harm others. Period.

The church, I believe, sits as the place in which the dynamics of heaven, as Jesus lived and taught them, can be most clear. In a sense, because of this, the church may well be the gateway to heaven. And, naturally, everyone wants to get there.

A man dies and goes to heaven.

St. Peter meets him at the Pearly Gates and says, "Here's how it works. You need 100 points to make it into heaven. You tell me all the good things you've done, and I give you a certain number of points for each item, depending on how good it was. When you reach 100 points, you get in."

"Okay," the man says, "I was married to the same woman for 50 years and never cheated on her, and loved her deep in my heart."

"That's wonderful," says St. Peter, "that's worth two points!"

"Only two points?" the man says. "Well, I attended church all my life and supported its ministry with my tithes and service."

"Terrific!" says St. Peter. "That's certainly worth a point."

"One point!?! I started a soup kitchen in my city and also worked in a shelter for homeless veterans."

"Fantastic, that's good for two more points," St. Peter says.

"Two points!?!!" Exasperated, the man cries, "At this rate, the only way I'll get into heaven is by the grace of God."

'Bingo! Now you can come in!' St Peter lets the man inside heaven.

It is in the church that one can learn most effectively about this grace of God, I think, and the priority of reliance upon God over self. Long before the introduction of this joke, the Christian faith contrasted salvation by works from salvation by grace. Only God can make heaven a reality for us...God tried to teach us that in the Old Testament, but humanity fell short in learning and following the law, so the Lord sent Jesus to tell us first-hand what the dynamics in heaven are like and to instruct us by example in the ways we are to replicate them.

I have this sign in my office: "Don't make me come down there." It should probably say, "Don't make me come down there again!" It is motivational for me each time I consider a not so heavenly choice.

It might be useful to think of our life here on earth as a prepping station...a training ground of sorts, getting us ready to move to heaven. It might be helpful, you know, to have some knowledge of how to live in heaven before we get there. We would not want our youth venturing out onto the interstate for a first time driving without having had hours of experience behind the wheel with supervision; nor would we ask a surgeon to perform surgery without an internship. What does the training look like and what does it entail? "Faith camp" we might call it. It means that you and I must commit ourselves to practicing heavenly dynamics here on earth. And like many preparations and trainings, the work is hard and difficult. Our Faith camp should look much like this text in Romans 5, verses 3-5:

And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

Alistair Cook shared the story of a student's discovery of the importance of what we are calling "Faith Camp" when she was asked to draw a picture of walking with Christ in her life.

“One of our Northern seminary students told me how her way of understanding her Christian life was changed by something that happened in one of her classes. Everyone had the task of drawing a picture which would illustrate their Christian life, their experience of walking with Christ. She did a great job – lots of light and bright colors, with images that showed the joy of her salvation, the hope that shone in her heart, the glory of the eternal life she now has.

It was impressive and the professor congratulated her. But she also asked the student a hard question: ‘There’s no darkness at all in your picture,’ she said, “so where are the hard times? Have there been no struggles in your Christian experience?’

“There had been struggles, but the student told me it had never occurred to her to show those in her picture. It was as if she had tried to forget them. Yet, she said, when she’d reflected on the professor’s question and on her life, she had learned as much through the hard times as she had in the easy times...maybe more.

Paul knew that. When he writes to the Romans, he’s clearly excited about God’s goodness in giving us peace and grace, but his picture of the Christian life has dark colors too.”

There is no such thing (for any of us) as living life without problems, difficulties, pain, disappointment, loss...suffering in all its forms. It is an integral part of life here on earth and being mortal. While God does not cause the suffering, because God is the author of good, God does convert it/redeem it so that we can use it for growth. Says Cook along with others, “There is no such thing as a trouble free Christian experience.”

Cook says that a friend once told him while he was going through an especially hard time in his life, “What matters most, Alistair, is not what happens to you but how you will use what happens to you.” Put simply, it is about our resilience.

This weekend a large tree branch fell on our roof doing some damage...thankfully, not a lot. In the clean up my son said to me, “You know, not everyone gets to see the tops of their trees.” Resilience.

The sermon title, Resilience to Resurrection, is particularly poignant for us in Severna Park. Like it or not, we are now known, researched, and studied for being a community where we are primarily self-reliant in that we tend to want to control most everything...including and especially, perhaps, the outcomes of our kids’ lives. It is said that we have become a community where coping skills and resilience are abilities that are deficits, if not lacking, in our youth... for the most part because we have intervened...all with good intention...to keep our children from struggling with the consequences of life. Resilience comes from having had to deal with adversity and taken the opportunity to bounce back from it. If we don’t experience adversity, we don’t get to practice resilience. We tend to “rescue” our kids instead of letting them suffer the consequences of their actions...hovering or helicoptering parents, we’ve been named. There can be profound psychological implications for this, and, as you know, Woods has been at the forefront in the community of addressing the concerns especially as they have related to depression, anxiety and suicide. Let me be clear, this is not just the parents. It is our culture.

But this morning I want to emphasize the spiritual importance of resilience. Resilience, in this regard, I'm defining as the ability to overcome the inevitable challenges and sufferings of life on earth so that we become better because of them and so that our suffering produces perseverance that builds character and yields hope for the future.

Interestingly, when the Apostle Paul talks about perseverance emerging from suffering, he uses the Greek word, *thlipsis*, for sufferings which at its root actually means "pressure." Pressure as a kind of suffering may come in the form of helpful things like a deadline that motivates us to persevere and complete a project. Pressure from a physical illness may compel us to persevere in a newly prescribed exercise routine cultivating a hope for a positive outcome. By the way, pressure to persevere is not the same as pressure to succeed.

What we learn in our Faith Camp training is to develop the characteristics of things in heaven the best that we can and to apply them here on earth. These have to do with relationships, as we said earlier, relationships with self and others. But they also have to do with our relationship with God. It is perhaps noteworthy that "relationship with God" is not commonly named as a characteristic of heaven on earth when it is likely the most vivid example...especially in prayer life.

It is through our relationship with God that we can best persevere, and it is the example that Jesus himself set. Maybe the most powerful moment in Christianity is the moment when Jesus suffered on the cross...having chosen to do so saying, *Not my will but thy will be done*, and thereby ushered in the resurrection.

I like to think of resurrection as the ultimate expression and outcome of resilience. In that moment, suspended between earth and heaven, Jesus became the bridge to heaven for us as he accepted the suffering and put his trust in God.

That's the key for us: acceptance of inevitable suffering, persevering in the midst of it so that character is built, which in turn births hope within us. Our resilience in our suffering IS the resurrection of hope in Jesus Christ.