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We Die, But Then What?

Celebration of All Saints

John 11:17-27; 1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-44, 53-58

A close member of my family loves to send out forwarded emails. Many of them contain humorous material about churches and the faith. Sometimes, I wish he had never bought a computer. At other times, I find myself laughing out loud.

Once, he sent me a series of pictures of dueling church signs. Our Lady of Martyrs Catholic church posted on its outdoor sign board the message, "All Dogs Go to Heaven." The church across the street, Beulah Cumberland Presbyterian, responded with a message of its own. "Only Humans Go to Heaven, Read the Bible." The Catholics responded with "God Loves all his Creatures, Dogs Included," to which the dour Presbyterians retorted, "Dogs Don't Have Souls, This is not Open for Debate." However, the debate continued with the next Catholic posting, "Catholic Dogs go to Heaven, Presbyterian Dogs can Talk to their Pastor."

Humorous as this sequence of signs might have been, there's more to the story, because it turns out that there is no Beulah Cumberland Presbyterian Church, and there is no Our Lady of Martyrs Catholic Church, and they certainly are not across the street from one another. The Cumberland Presbyterian Church, a sister denomination to our own, was so inundated with questions about their theology that they had to post an official response on their web site. Whether or not dogs go to heaven "is not a theological issue for the Cumberland Presbyterian Church" and is "not addressed in the Confession of Faith."

I've got to say that I was a bit relieved to discover that the whole thing was a practical joke. After all, the Presbyterians were looking a bit too stuffy in this interchange. The Catholics were having all the fun.

Is it O.K. to laugh about heaven? After all, it is the subject of many jokes, which tell of words exchanged with Peter at the pearly gates or what the doctor and the lawyer, or the priest and the rabbi do once they arrive there. All of these make for regular punch lines. Can we laugh about heaven, or must we preserve a deadly seriousness about it?

Hopefully, that phrase sounds like an oxymoron to your ears, because dead and seriousness simply should not be spoken of in the same breath as heaven. Heaven is a joy and the afterlife a completion of all of God's grace-filled plans. Many times, however, Christians have turned the afterlife into something deadly serious: a threat, a matter for worry, or a weapon to use against someone else.

When a new preacher moved into town, one of the first people he met said, "I certainly hope that you're not one of those narrow-minded ministers who think that only the members of your congregation are going to heaven."

The preacher replied: "I'm even more narrow-minded than that. I'm pretty sure that some of the members of my congregation aren't going to make it either."

In some of our ruminations about heaven, there are the rough edges of doubt and the sharp edges of exclusion. Too often, we take our own prejudices and project them upon the fabric of heaven. If there is someone we are loathe to see upon the streets of our town, we are quite willing to say that God would not want them on the streets of heaven either. But, it's always a risky assumption to make since we worship a Savior who eats with the tax collectors

and sinners, makes a habit of gathering in the outcasts, and offends the rich, the powerful, and the self-assured.

My hunch is that some folk want to say more about heaven than they should. They want to make sure all the pieces fit together according to their own pre-conceived ideas, and so they come up with notions that are foreign to the witness of Scripture. The *Left Behind* books and movies are an example of this. Taking a literalist view of what are symbolic and poetic passages from various parts of Scripture, the books are short on theology but good on suspense. On Amazon.com, I read a customer review that breathlessly stated that these books are better than the Bible! It went on to say that many readers have been brought to Christ because of them. I wonder what Christ they have been led to embrace.

A few years ago, a church member asked me if the memory of those who are not saved will be wiped away from the minds of those who are. She'd heard a T.V. preacher relating this idea which represents an attempt to reconcile a doctrine of limited atonement (which says only a select group will make it to heaven) and the vision of heaven in the book of Revelation where "mourning and crying and pain will be no more." The dilemma, simply put, is that if someone makes it to heaven but their favorite uncle, or their close friend from down the street, or their beloved spouse or child is not there, they will be sad and distressed. God wipes away the memory of those who aren't saved, according to this view.

The danger of such human logic is that it creates a troubling picture of God, as one who distorts memory, twists the facts, and nullifies human experience.

All Saints' Day stands in absolute tension with these two examples of popular theology. Rather than "Left Behind," All Saints Day asks us to ponder the miracle of being included. Rather than forgetting, All Saints' Day invites us to experience the healing power of

remembering. It is a celebration of what God has done, is doing, and will continue to do, calling us, inviting us, to be a part of the transformation and the completion of this world and all who are a part of it. Paul says, “He will transform our humble bodies to be conformed to his glorious body.” In the most austere language Paul expresses a confident hope that in the end, we will be made whole; we will be completed in a way that we cannot fully imagine right now. “Someone will ask, ‘How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?’ Fool!” Paul exclaims, “What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed . . .”

One of the most interesting things about being a parent is thinking about what our children will be like when they grow up. It’s hard to do with an infant in our arms, but it is fun, nevertheless. In fact, as they look at us with wide eyes, gurgling and cooing, reaching for the love they need, we have no idea what they will look like or sound like or be involved in decades in the future. Still, there are hints, if we can interpret them, aspects of personality that are already in place at an amazingly young age. When we know the mature person we can flip back to their baby book and see that who they have become was present, even back then. A familiar expression on their face, the way they raised an eyebrow, or held a cup to their lips: they are still doing those same things.

We are all babies now, at least from God’s perspective. “What we will be has not yet been revealed.” We have much growing up to do. What we will become is hard to imagine. However, there are lines of continuity already being drawn, basic inclinations firmly rooted and established. A fundamental hope of the Christian faith is that the features which give us our unique identity will have eternal significance. We look forward to a life beyond death not as

some disembodied, unrecognizable, ethereal, vaporous presence. We anticipate the resurrection of the body. And that implies is that we will be ourselves. Only changed.

Paul describes this change as our becoming a “new creation,” part of a “new humanity.” And in our passage for today he writes, “What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body.”

Scripture does not tell us much more than this. It never describes literally where we will be or how we will exist after time. It does, however, describe who we will be. That is, we will be ourselves, and we will be God’s own. We will be complete so that whatever is broken now will be restored then, whatever is missing now will be provided then.

I once stood beside a family as their father and husband was dying. Years before he had lost a leg in a tractor accident. Prostheses never seemed to work for him, and he spent most of his adult life on crutches. As soon as he expired that day his son-in-law said, “He’s thrown away the crutches. He’s walking now.” That, I believe, is a statement of the gospel’s truth. Whatever is empty will be filled. Whatever is sinful will be forgiven. Whatever is estranged will be reconciled.

We cannot say for sure what will be the shape of the resurrected life. The writers of Scripture do not answer every question we could think up. Rather, they express a simple confidence that our future is in God’s hands. And who can be trusted with our fate more than the loving and just God who sent his only Son? Of the Biblical witnesses, Shirley Guthrie has said, “They had no time to sit around speculating and arguing about when, where, and how new life in the kingdom of God would come; they were too busy living here and now in joyful and confident anticipation of it.”¹

We should follow their example. Where the Bible is silent, we should be silent as well. But, where Scripture speaks, we should never shy away from adding our ‘Amen!’

So, we live in the present in light of that future hope, knowing that what is going to happen to us, our loved ones, and the whole world will be better than the very best we could ever imagine or dream. That should bring a smile to our lips and laughter to our hearts. Thanks be to God.

¹ *Christian Doctrine*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994.