

**OPENING TO THE SOFT SPOT-7**  
**ALL THE WAY TO HEAVEN IS HEAVEN**

(09/04/16)

Scripture Lesson: Luke 17:20-21

*“For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among (within) you.”* (Luke 17:21)  
*“All the way to heaven is heaven.”* (St. Theresa of Liseaux)

This summer we have been reflecting on a theme from the Beatitudes, which are part of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. The Beatitudes, which offer guidance in the living of a blessed or happy life, counsel us toward vulnerability rather than invulnerability, toward humility rather than pride, toward engaging our suffering rather than trying to avoid it in our pursuit of pleasure.

Jesus’ teaching runs counter to our secular values. As Wilhelm Reich pointed out, we construct a suit of armor to protect us from being hurt by other people, from being wounded by life. This armor may keep us relatively safe, but it also serves to isolate us. The thicker our armor, the more difficult it is for us to experience intimacy and love. However, it takes a lot of courage to remove it.

No matter how deeply we have been wounded in life, and some of us have indeed been deeply wounded, there will always be a soft spot in our armor. Each of us has an Achilles heel, a spot of vulnerability. Whenever some person manages to break through our defenses with love, or whenever Jesus manages to touch us in those moments when we are vulnerable and open to his Spirit, our hearts open to the fullness of life, to other people, and to our own individuation.

A few weeks ago we noted that the desire to increase pleasure and decrease pain may prevent us from experiencing the redemptive transformation of meaningful suffering. The quest for power and control over life and other people prevents us from approaching Jesus “just as we are.” Even our religious beliefs may function as a defense system that cuts us off from life. One such belief system is the dichotomization of earth and heaven, the belief that they are two separate “places.” This way of thinking can keep us from experiencing the kingdom of God.

I don’t know if heaven is a different “place” than earth. I do become uneasy, however, when I am told that this life is not important, that what is important is heaven. This “vale of tears,” this “realm of Satan” is just a proving ground. If we do a good job “down here” we get to go “up” when we die; we get to leave this terrible place with all its pain and suffering. I think that this way of looking at earth and heaven may be a way of protecting us from taking the pain

and the struggles of this life seriously. I have heard too many sermons assuring me that I should look forward to dying because when we die we come into the realm of God; when we die we can finally be with Jesus. I would rather be in the kingdom of God; I would rather be with Jesus right here and now.

A dichotomizing theology leads us to devalue this life. What is important is the life that we enter after we die. We commonly use the word “eternity” to describe life after death, meaning that this life goes on forever. However, I am not sure that this is what eternity means; I am not sure that this is what Jesus means by eternity. We can experience eternity in this life. In those moments when we experience the intersection of the eternal and the temporal, the divine and the human, we find ourselves in the kingdom of heaven, in the kingdom of God.

When asked about what happens to us after we die, Jesus said little. He said that it is not like our experience here on earth. Jesus was more interested in helping people not only understand but also experience heaven on earth: heaven here and now.

I believe that the kingdom of heaven was the central focus of Jesus’ teaching. Jesus pointed past himself to the kingdom of heaven, helping his listeners experience this as a spiritual reality both among and within them. In the three different translations of today’s gospel lesson, Jesus tells his listeners that the kingdom of heaven is “in their midst,” “among them,” or “within them.” In this teaching, Jesus tries to connect his listeners to the realm of the eternal, the realm of the sacred, the spiritual realm that transcends space and time as an experience here and now.

In the worldview of the ancient Hebrews, heaven referred to what was above the firmament, the massive transparent dome that was believed to cover the earth. The Hebrews believed that there were waters both above and below the earth. At the time of the great flood,

*In the six hundredth year of Noah’s life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on that day all the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened. (Genesis 7:11)*

You can see why I am not particularly interested in drawing scientific conclusions from scripture. I doubt that Noah lived six hundred years at a time when there were no antibiotics, and I don’t know how they determined the exact month and day the flood began when the calendar had not yet been invented. We also know that our earth is not flat and is not covered with an upside down transparent bowl, as the ancient Hebrews believed. The firmament of heaven, the abode of the stars, sun, and moon, was also the abode of God. In 1 Kings 8:30 we read,

*Hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place: O hear in heaven your dwelling place; heed and forgive.*

The ancient Hebrews believed that God did not dwell on earth, but in heaven. Heaven was the place where God was enthroned. It was also a place where we might go after we die. The prophet Elijah, doer of mighty deeds, was taken up to heaven in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:1-2).

The term “kingdom of heaven” appears only in the New Testament. The majority of references to it are found in the synoptic gospels. Jesus uses the term “heaven” in the phrase “kingdom of heaven” in a different way than the word “heaven” was used in the Old Testament. I think this is important, because I have the feeling that Jesus was not simply building upon the Old Testament foundation. He brought a new message, a new understanding of God, a message he taught and incarnated.

Jesus tells us that the kingdom of heaven has come near, is already in the midst of us, is already among us, or is already within us. Matthew tells us,

*From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near (or is at hand).”*

Mark 1:15 tells us,

*Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news (or gospel) of God (or of the kingdom), and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near (or is at hand); repent, and believe in the good news.”*

When Jesus sends out his disciples, he does so with the following instructions:

*As you go, proclaim the good news, “The kingdom of heaven has come near.” Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. (Mt. 10:7)*

Jesus did not want people to worship him; rather he pointed past himself to a spiritual reality that “was at hand.” This is the good news or gospel of the kingdom of heaven.

A former Roman Catholic nun who is a friend of mine once reminded me of a quote from the French mystic Theresa of Liseaux. St. Theresa said, “All the way to heaven is heaven.”

All the way to heaven is heaven. We may be on a journey to heaven, but we need to remember that during this journey we are already in heaven. Heaven is not only a goal toward which we strive, either where we go after we die or the time when God’s will is done on earth as it is in heaven. It is also here and now. Heaven is not separate from us. It is here in our midst, among us, and within us on our journey.

The heaven to which we go after we die is an article of faith. Heaven here and now is an experience of the divine, the sacred, the transcendent among us and within us. We believe what we do not know. What we experience, we know. Carl Gustav Jung, when asked whether he believed in God responded, “I don’t believe; I know!” This is the voice of experience.

The Sacrament of Holy Communion is a sacrament of presence. Of the two sacraments we observe as Protestants or the seven that are observed in the Roman and Eastern traditions, this is the only sacrament of presence. Baptism, confirmation, ordination, and marriage are sacraments of commitment. Confession and last rites are sacraments of reconciliation and preparation. Communion is a sacrament of presence. In this sacrament we let down our defenses; we open our hearts to the indwelling presence of our Lord.

As we join our hearts in the Sacrament of Holy Communion, let us open our hearts to the living Christ who dwells both within and among us. Following the resurrection, Jesus’ disciples saw the empty tomb. They encountered Jesus in several ways and places in the forty days that followed, and they saw him ascend to heaven. But their experience did not end here. They finally experienced him in their midst, both among and within them in such a way that they knew they could never again be separated from him. Then they realized what he meant when he said, “Lo, I am with you always.”

Through this sacrament of presence, let us dissolve the false separation of space and time that separates earth from heaven and us from God. Let us dissolve the armor that keeps us from loving this life, this mysterious life with all its pleasure and pain, all its joys and sorrows, the armor that keeps us from being touched by the pain that so many of our brothers and sisters experience every day.

Let us be present to our Lord and to each other in this sacrament, that we might live this life fully, and that we might experience the kingdom of heaven right here and now. Then, as we go about our daily life in the week to come, let us remember that all the way to heaven is heaven.

*A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson  
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