

“So This Is Heaven”

A sermon by
the Rev. David S. Blanchard

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Syracuse

November 16, 2003

**“The fear of hell is hell itself,
and the longing for paradise is paradise itself.”**

-Kahlil Gibran

It's something of a coincidence that my first memory of trying to comprehend heaven happened precisely 40 years ago this week. I only remember that because the memory is associated with the national trauma that came with the assassination of President Kennedy. I don't remember too much that happened when I was five, and what I remember may not be precise or exact, but it all seems quite vivid and intact from here.

Our fathers at work, our mothers at home, and my friends and I done with morning kindergarten at Ed Smith School, I suspect we were sent outside to play as the tragic events in Dallas were being reported on the televisions inside. My neighborhood pals – a Catholic and an Episcopalian – had more concrete images of heaven than I, and the way they figured it, if we just watched the skies closely enough, we would see the President making his way to Heaven – as if he was a birthday balloon floating up and out of reach. I remember it to have been a beautiful fall afternoon, and have an idea we lay on our backs on the lawn – but I wouldn't bet on it. We did stay at the task for a long while – which for 5-year-olds, was probably about 5 minutes. And alas – we caught nary a glimpse of the President – my friends chalking it up to bad luck rather than bad theology. I, well, I was skeptical. I remain so.

Heaven is one of those theological concepts that is easier for many of us to deny – or just dismiss – than to reappropriate in ways that could reflect our deepest grasp of life's meaning and purpose. For me, the most stubborn obstacle to having and engaging and nuanced discussions about this state of being named Heaven, is that for many, Heaven stayed as small as I was in 1963, and as little as my friends imagination. There was nothing symbolic or metaphorical about that Heaven. It was a piece of real estate in the sky. A place. A place inhabited by every worthy soul the world produced. Just one sweet angel after the next... lots of harp music... soft pillowy clouds to nap on... everyone you ever loved was there, saving you a seat.

Before I go any further I should say this: for all I know, that may be just how Heaven looks. I'm not counting on it. There's been nothing in my experience or understanding that would have me believe in such a place, and for all I know, I might not have the credentials for admission, anyhow. But if it were true – it would leave me astonished – but not at all disappointed to meet up again with my grandparents, a couple of golden retrievers, and a chance to look up Frederick Betts to compare notes. (You can see Dr. Betts' visage four pictures down from mine in the stairwell.)

So it's not always clear how to respond if someone asks us if we believe in Heaven. I suppose it's why I like Billy Collins' poem so much, that notion "that everyone is right, as it turns out. "You go to the place you always thought you would go." What is most essential is not being right – right about something none of us can know this side of all parting – but about understanding **this life** in the fullest context imaginable – as part of all Life, all Love, all Blessing, all Grace. Such a view refuses to separate us from what went before us and what comes after us. Whatever heaven or hell can mean, they can never be entirely separate from what we experience in the time of our living. They are reflections of states of being we have encountered through living; through experiences of anguish and peace, longing and fulfillment, suffering and delight, alienation and belonging. Heaven and hell don't need to be dreamed up since they have their inescapable reality in our own encounters with life's shadows and light. The rest is just details.

Preaching about heaven is speculative at best. As one wag remarked, "A church is a place in which clergymen who have never been to heaven preach about it to people who will never get there." (H. L. Mencken – *Clearly*, he wasn't referring to Unitarian Universalist congregation.) It seems to me that there are two significant points to be made about Heaven and Hell: #1 – No one knows. #2 – Most wonder at least metaphorically, "What becomes of all we are when we leave this life?" And because of this uncertainty and this longing it has been the human impulse to fill that void with images of our own design to satisfy our species' hunger for meaning. Just as the human imagination has offered, in every time and place, explanations for the origins of creation – in mythology, in theology, in poetry, and in ritual – it has done the same with the other end of life. It still goes on. I just spent a couple hours reading a little book by Mitch Albom (author of Tuesdays with Morrie) called The Five People You Meet in Heaven. It's destined, I'm certain, to be a made-for-TV movie – something of a compliment and a curse. It promises that, in the end, in heaven, the full meaning of our lives will be made known to us. Me, I'm hoping for a few hints this side of Heaven. It's fiction, not theology, and as stories go, this is a good one.

One notable and consistent feature of the irresistible human impulse to shape abstractions of the afterlife, are their dualistic natures. (Mark Twain suggested we might go to Heaven for the climate, but Hell for the company.) Typically, the afterlife is ruled by a system of rewards and punishments for who we were and the life we led. It is what we have come to expect.

Some religious systems made it easier than others to make it to Heaven. Some earn salvation by grace and some by works. Some, like the Calvinist tradition, understood some people as having been born among "the elect," and some – no matter how faithful or virtuous – would remain unsaved. It was against such thinking that both the Unitarians and the Universalists emerged in the 19th century, preaching theologies of human worth and universal salvation. They were among the first to grasp that heaven and hell were not distinct and separate from life, but were realities we would be confronted with in this world. They were among the first to suggest that heaven and hell might not even be distinct and separate from each other; that there was a unity in creation that even humans could not divide. We remain, still seeking to make meaning of such a creation.

Most of the religious culture that surrounds us is built upon a kind of exclusionary vision of what it means to be among God's chosen, and by implication – God's "not-chosen." Without knowledge of how many punches we need on our ticket to eternity, we humans

have done the next best thing. We made up a complex ticketing system based on God knows what, to do our best to let “Us” in, to keep those who are “Not Us” out. (It’s astounding how it always seems to work out that way.)

In an essay titled “Getting Into Heaven,” Nevada Barr writes: “One day I read the words, ‘There are three thousand six hundred gates into heaven.’ I’ve forgotten the prophet who wrote it and the religion or philosophy that spawned it, but the words stay with me.” I like the idea. It feels right. I cannot think of any omnipotent being worth his (her?) salt who would be so narrow-minded as to haggle over the small print of contracts penned by mortals, many of whom I suspect have axes to grind. That would reduce the concept of salvation to game-show status: say the magic word and win eternal life. The magic word is Jesus, Mohammed, Buddha, Aphrodite -- depending on where the contestant was born.

I wish she had been able to remember where she read of the 3,600 gates to Heaven. It’s a marvelous image in the way it permits us all to imagine another way in, other than proofed by St. Peter at the gate. I have found that the imagery of the poets is more compelling than that of the theologians when it comes to conceiving of what life becomes. The theologians are clearly not into marketing. If anything, traditional conceptions of heaven seem a tad boring. There’s a wonderful line in a novel where a little girl asked if she were **very good** up in Heaven, whether they’d let her go down to play in Hell on Saturday afternoons? (The Gates Ajar, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps)

No doubt, it is the power of metaphor that is permitted poetry that is most compelling and convincing to me. We don’t expect the poets to describe what we see, or even what we know. We expect much more from them. We count on them to suspend our disbelief just long enough to have our certainties challenged, and perhaps realigned. They make it possible for us to peer through some of the three thousand six hundred doors to heaven. In her poem, “When Death Comes,” Mary Oliver – as earthy a poet there ever was – in anticipation of the final time writes:

And therefore I look upon everything
as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,
and I look upon time as no more than an idea,
and I consider eternity as another possibility.

It would be tempting to dismiss our images of heaven as a mere human projection of unquenchable longing. But after nearly 20 years as a parish minister, I have long ago abandoned the need or wish to persuade anyone from a source of comfort or consolation on the grounds of my puny view of the Universe. Because I know some are consoled by heavenly images of relationship, while others find profound comfort in the thought of simply being returned to the state of the eternal elements of nature, I am interested, always, in having people tell me more about that “place” – if it’s a place, -- or that reality in whatever shape it ultimately takes. Because remember Lazarus’ kept secret – “that everyone is right. You go to the place you always thought you’d go.” Because that part of the story of life has its origins in this world. It is not a new story. It’s just the next chapter. What we believe – or don’t believe – about Heaven (or Hell or God or Grace) turns out to reveal much more about us than about the thing we would describe. It is beyond the world of rights and wrongs. It summons in us the most essential spiritual virtue I know – **humility** – that allows us to begin and end every dialogue with the mutual acknowledgment, **“You might be right.”** Imagine if the Israelis and the Palestinians gave it a try... Or the Catholics and the Protestants in Northern Ireland... Or even the

theists and the humanists in our own communion (we don't do physical harm, but we can employ tolerance stingily among ourselves).

So, you may be wondering – what do you believe, David?

I suppose I owe you that much, having brought up the subject in the first place. Well, for starters I need to tell you that I am engaged now in some deep and profound work to alter some unconscious and dangerous patterns of thinking about how this life is linked to whatever comes next. I'm still unpacking all of its meaning and implications. It took a poem to loosen those thoughts. It's why the arts are so damn subversive... NO wonder they scare some folks. Anyhow, I'll get to the poem in a minute.

For all my liberal thinking, for all my understanding of suffering and of grace, for all my passion for our first principle of the inherent worth and dignity of every person, I've learned how cleverly disguised, and deeply imprinted, come the notions that in this life we get what we deserve, and when fully extended – how we get what we deserve for all time and eternity. Sort of a Santa Claus theology, rooted in some heavenly judgment of the naughty and the nice. Now, prior to reading this particular poem, I would have fiercely denied that any remnant of that line of thinking lingered within me. A sob, coming out of nowhere while reading a poem, told me otherwise.

I don't know what Heaven is.

But I know, or at least I trust, that it is not about rewards and punishments.

I imagine it's sort of like that high school in Iowa where there are no cuts for the cheerleading squad. They have 123 cheerleaders surrounding the football field.

Too heavy? – no such thing. Too short? – who cares? Uncoordinated – what's that?

Can't afford the uniform? – here's one. Shy? – join the club.

No one is left out. No one is left behind.

No exceptions.

Heaven (and Hell) are not places where we experience rewards and punishments – those are all part of the drama of this life. Those are a part of living. And they can either make us wise or bitter, trusting or suspicious, generous or selfish – and that, in turn, introduces us to all we need to know of heaven or hell.

Call it what you will.

It is the deepest reality we are capable of imagining, and best as I can tell, it is beyond my choosing.

So heaven is always closer than we think.

It's shaped by the work of our hands and hearts.

It's shaped by insignificant kindnesses and uninhibited gratitude.

It's shaped by the choices we've made to heal and not to harm.

It's shaped by a fully embodied humility that permits us to be present to others and trusting in the face of Mystery.

I don't know if there is a way to **get** there.

But from time to time, it seems like I am granted a chance to **be** there – this side of all endings.

And when I **am** there, I am never alone. Beyond this, I suppose anything is possible.

I close with the poem that got this whole reflection started. It's called – suitably –
“Heaven”

What if you could know
you're better than someone else?
Not better in one small way –
a better lover, listener, cooker of pasta,
writer of poems – but entirely,
absolutely better?

What if you have to choose life
for one of you, for the other, death?
And what if, after long, careful,
anguished thought – because,
after all, you're the better person –
you make the right choice?

And what if, later, when you die,
there really is heaven and God
and perfection isn't boring
but endlessly interesting, satisfying,
a challenge you only just meet –
like life, but the rules work?

And what if one day – it's raining or bright,
perfect either way – God takes you aside
and you sit down with a favorite drink,
hot or cold depending on the weather,
in your throat its ideal mate of thirst,

and God smiles, lays on your hand
a huge scarred paw, says
That day you chose the better person?
Well, you were wrong. But stay
as long as you want –
we like having you here.

And patting your hand
God rises, eyes already gone
in that galactic reach,
looking for the next fool who
between heaven and hell,
expected a difference.

-Richard Lehnert