

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Barbra R. Cunningham, minister for pastoral care, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, on July 27, 2008, and dedicated to the glory of God!

“What is Heaven Like?”

Matthew, 13:31-33, 44-52

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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We hear these different descriptions of what heaven is like in our scripture today.

We are quite familiar with the planting of the mustard seed, a symbol of the tiniest seed that is planted can grow into the largest shrub, and becomes a tree for the birds to nest. And those of us who have made bread or raised rolls relate to the story of the yeast. It is amazing what the ingredients of the yeast can do.

And it is said in the scripture about Jesus, "Without a parable he told them nothing!" So as Jesus spoke from the experiences of the people so they could understand, so we take our experiences and relate them to what God is saying and what we imagine heaven to be like. Although I doubt that we think much about heaven, because it, to me, is right here and now.

These stories from the scriptures are telling us of the work of God in the world 2,000 plus years ago. What are our experiences of where we see God, or what is heaven like in our time? Have you ever smiled walking down the street, or talked to people on an elevator? The response is varied, but freeing!

Today I'd like to explore how we create heaven for ourselves here on this earth, and how we see God as we live day to day. We can never be satisfied to know *about* God. Really knowing God comes through experiences in life as God is revealed to us through those experiences, and thus we imagine what heaven is like.

God revealed ? He we ever seen god? Perhaps, if we have looked carefully and our eyes are open. Remember the mustard seed. Tiny, but when planted – wow, does it grow!

How could this real life story have been changed? A lawyer walked down the street with his colleague, both dressed in nice suits. The conversation of these two was of concern for the client whom they felt had

been wrongly accused of a crime. These were caring men of stature in their community, known for their defense of persons in need, and of their sensitivity to issues that face the community they serve.

Lying on the ground below their office building, on the street, dirty and unkempt, was a man who was homeless, not extremely coherent and asking for help. This was not an uncommon sight on the streets of this city, nor uncommon to those caring lawyers who were walking by. They did not look at the man lying there, did not acknowledge his presence, and kept talking as they parted to get around his physical presence.

No one knows what they were thinking. No one really knows what they were feeling. No one knows what the homeless man was thinking or feeling. Most of us can imagine what the lawyers were thinking and feeling, because probably not one of us has been spared this experience!

There are so many ideas of what truly helps a person in this situation. But at the least, looking them in the eye and saying something to them gives them a feeling of being human. It is our discomfort that keeps us from speaking – the possibility of being scolded for not giving them money. Where is God in this situation?

Did you know that a study shows that 72% of Americans admit they don't know the people next door? Forty-five percent have never spent an evening with their neighbors; 42% have never borrowed anything from them (probably a good thing), 27% have

never been inside their homes, 15% don't even know their names.

If we were asked, what would be our percentages? Do we even know our neighbor here at church? How do we start? I find that you are good at talking to one another and to strangers in the social hour after church – better than most churches I've been to. I commend you on that.

My experience tells me that the biggest plea from another person is to be acknowledged, heard, understood and loved for who they are. Reaching out to another person who is not known to us is risky business today. Yet when we know faces to put on those who are not like us, or who are our neighbors, when we know something about their partner, their children, their grandchild or their life in general, we are more likely to know how to help in times of trouble. Isn't that seeing God here on earth?

Some of you may remember when Tim told one of my favorite stories that helps us to see God in experiences. It was about a religious order of priests who were known for training new priests. As they were growing older they were arguing over who was the best teacher, the most holy and the most likely to be the respected teacher of the new priests.

Because of all the fighting they were losing new candidates. So, the monsignor was called in to answer the question, "Who is the best?" After a long silence, the monsignor replied, "The Christ is among you." And he promptly turned and left.

As they began to wonder which one is the Christ, their behavior began to change toward each other. They were more loving, less competitive and each became the best they could be, just in case “the Christ among them” was watching. Soon it became a lifestyle, and new priests began to flock to that peaceful place to be trained. Never doubt the power of the littlest thing!!!

What if we talked to each person we met as if the Christ were in that person, and it was up to us to be the best we could to that person? What if we treated *ourselves* as if the Christ were in us? Imagine the power the world could have if we who claim to be Christian took upon ourselves to live the Christ in us? We could awaken ourselves from our apathy and insensitivity. We could realize our common struggles and destiny as human beings with a common vision for a better world. We could transform our social policies and political process. We could transform our educational system.

Recognizing the Christ in each one of us would help us know we belong to the same circle, we share the same vision, we participate in the same struggles. We are, as Christ-like Christians, in the circle that binds us as one humanity. Who is my neighbor? All humanity whom God calls us to love, god’s humanity. We are called to know, live with, touch and hold one another. Our love will persevere. Perhaps these are the new parables of the vision of heaven that we add to the scripture. There is hope for the world. Sometimes we have trouble seeing it.

Those of you who have raised your children know God in the faces of those children, and as we try to teach them, we hear what they understand about God. It isn't always easy to get across what we mean. My son, when he was 3 years old, went to church school regularly. He often came home with stories he had heard. One day when he was told to finish his lunch (he had a hamburger) and he said back to me, "I can't eat this meat. Jesus is in my tummy and he doesn't like meat." I suppose we all use the stories of Jesus to our own benefit.

Those of you who teach or have taught school and have worked for the dignity of children in a world that tries to strip it away, know God in the hearts of those children as you work for children's rights.

Those of you who are in business and strive for fairness and integrity in a world that seems to have lost its integrity, know God in those you work with as you work toward fairness and integrity in the business world.

Those of you who are in medicine and work for health among those with disease, know God in those who are sick as you work to make them well, and in those with whom you work.

All of us will tomorrow morning get up out of bed and try to make the world a better place. Sometimes we don't even know when we make a difference, or we discount what we do. The truth is,

God is everywhere, not just where we expect to find God.

There was a woman in my home church who worked three nights a week at our church's homeless center. No one in the congregation was as involved as she, and I always believed she was one who really saw the Christ in each person.

Years after I left, I went to her and told her how much I appreciated her ministry, how much she had taught me over the years and commented on her great faith. She said, "I don't really have that much faith. That's the point of why I'm here. I need all the help I can get to see the Christ, to understand what I have to do to be close to God. So I keep very close to those whom God keeps close. That's why I am here." How sad that she could not see the Christ in herself, and that God never left her.

What do *we want* when we come to church? We want the reminder of the Christ living in each one, the love of friends, the quiet time of prayer, the thanksgiving to God for giving us purpose and life to live. We don't want God in a box, or a building. We want to renew our relationship with others who honor the God in each one. God is in the midst of all relationships, in all places, in all human beings we encounter. When we as strangers and friends act like neighbors, communities are reinvigorated. God is present, and hope abounds.

Sometimes we do not know the results of helping someone. In fact, as a minister, there are times I will

never know whether I make a difference in someone's life. Yet, I go on, doing things without the need for recognition, because what I have done has helped me be a better person.

I learned this lesson long ago. My mom and dad took us to church every Sunday so that became a ritual I loved. I got to see my friends, and to sing duets with my girlfriend, to read scripture and just generally participate. It was a part of my life. I loved to sing and our youth group took on a project of visiting in nursing homes. We would sing hymns with the people there and read to them. We each adopted one person as our project, brought them presents, flowers, or candy, and got to know their families.

It was there I learned and experienced the first death of a person close to me. My friend died the day before I was to visit, and I remember feeling the emptiness of losing a friend. As I remembered her, the light in her face as she saw me approaching, the love in her heart, the wisdom of her mind, and the pain in her life that she shared with me brought me great joy and comfort. She was a beautiful woman who lived until she was 90 and never stopped giving of herself. That was the Christ in her that I will never forget.

Where have you seen the Christ lately? Have you looked deeply into the heart and soul of another person? Do you smile at the stranger, speak to the person that is unlike you, invite your neighbor to share her life story? If not, now is the time to begin! Plant the tiniest seed, like the mustard seed, or nurture the friendships that grow like the yeast in the

bread. Know that God is within you, each one.
Blessed be the community of faith we are! Amen.

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