

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
SURPRISES IN THE KINGDOM
LUKE 13:22-30
August 22, 2010
10:00 A.M. SERVICE**

Apparently Jesus never expected to launch a mass movement. He knew that few people would embrace his message. Those who turned away missed the opportunity to experience all the benefits that come from knowing Christ.

Discipline and difficulty provide us with opportunities to learn. And there is opportunity in every experience of suffering. The trials of life can be considered as discipline sent by God to purify the heart, to enrich the mind and to strengthen the spirit.

Looking back, most people do not regret the things they have done. Mistakes and failures tend to be accepted since they were learning experiences. What people regret are things they did not do. Feelings of love they failed to express, acts of kindness they failed to perform, gifts un-given, these are the things that haunt our memories.

Comedians and cartoonists rely heavily on serious subjects as sources of humor. Politics, marriage, crime, surgery, and psychoanalysis are some examples. The world of humor would be decidedly poorer without death and the afterlife. You will find more references to heaven and hell in The New Yorker cartoons than in a month of sermons! If that surprises you, may I suggest that there will also be surprises in eternity? As a matter of fact, Jesus himself said as much.

The attraction of heaven.

Almost everyone is attracted to some idea of heaven. This does not mean everyone actually believes in heaven; but, given the troublesome aspects of our mortality, as well as the fear of death, the hope of some kind of afterlife is strong. **(King Tut)** Concepts of heaven are endlessly varied. Some are simply wishful

thinking, such as one's favorite pastime, or one's favorite meal, enjoyed *ad infinitum*. It is frequently observed that one person's heaven is another person's hell, and *vice versa*. Many concepts of heaven are disgusting or boring to some people. Others are difficult to take seriously. It makes one wonder: Could even God come up with a heaven that would be approved by everyone?

Still, some kind of heaven, or immortality, is almost taken for granted, even among people who profess no religious faith. A recently departed loved one may be said to be "**somewhere up there watching me.**" People who are otherwise thoroughly secular may be found to be working with certain generically religious assumptions about what happens when a person dies. The point is that some understanding of heaven, or life after death, is attractive to most people. It helps us cope with the certainty of death, both our own and that of our loved ones.

A greater concern than the nature of heaven, for many people, is whether they will go there. If we believe in both heaven and hell, this can be a disturbing consideration. Do all good people go to heaven? If so, have I been good enough? Do only Christians go to heaven? If so, what about the millions of people who have never even heard of Jesus Christ? On other hand, would it be heaven if everyone, including the Boston strangler, went there?

Jesus on the kingdom of God.

During his earthly ministry, the people often confronted Jesus with many questions about heaven, or, as they often called it, *the kingdom of God*. In today's lesson from Luke, Jesus continues his journey to Jerusalem where he will suffer and die. Many of his followers, however, believed that when he arrived at Jerusalem he would inaugurate his messianic kingdom. People then had some of the same concerns as we do today. Who will be in heaven? Will I go to heaven? It was likely someone with these concerns asked a slightly less direct question: "**Lord, will those who are saved be few?**"

The number of people included in the kingdom was a frequent subject of debate in Jewish circles. Some said all Jews would inherit the heavenly kingdom, but some Jewish sects insisted that only a few would be saved when the crisis came. This debate was an exercise in futility, as it is today. What mere mortal could possibly determine the exact boundaries of God's eternal kingdom? Those presumptuous enough to think they have such knowledge are customarily confident of their own place among the insiders. Jesus' response gave no comfort to those who felt certain of their inclusion. He literally said, "**Keep on striving to**

enter the narrow door, for many will try and not be able.” Not only is the door narrow and difficult to enter, but the door will not remain open forever. The day is coming when many will seek to enter and find the door is permanently shut. Such is the tragedy of missed opportunities.

Jesus may have been addressing a common type of hypocrisy. People who want the best of both worlds may calculate how long they can delay before entering God’s kingdom. Why go through the narrow door before it is necessary? Timing is everything! Jesus warns that such calculating misses the point and will not succeed.

Heaven on earth.

Jesus says that beyond the narrow door are further surprises. People will come into God’s kingdom from all over the world, not just from Israel. Some of Jesus’ own people believed being descendants of Abraham alone qualified them for the kingdom of God. Some of them were in for a huge surprise. God’s favor is not based on race, and Gentiles will be found at the heavenly banquet. But this is true for us, as well. Some whom we saw as the lowest on the totem pole will be found to be the highest, and *vice versa*. The first will be last, and the last will be first. In other words, the ways we judge or evaluate other people is not the way God sees them. Those we praise may not be praiseworthy to God. And those we scarcely notice may be exalted by the One who sees and knows all.

Jesus says that in the kingdom of God there will be an overturning of the values and categories of this age. We will see that the excluded are the included, and the included are the excluded. The righteous are the sinners, and the sinners are the righteous. Tax collectors and harlots always go into the kingdom before religious people, not because of their sin but because they recognize that they are sinners. If this is what the kingdom of God is like, it should influence how we see things in the world. If we were to treat the last as the first, if we were to include the excluded, if we were to extend love and forgiveness to our enemies, then we would make possible a little bit of heaven on earth.

The kingdom of God is a mysterious subject to many people, which is understandable. But the surprises Christ said some would find in the kingdom of God should not surprise us. If we have listened to him at all, we know he repudiates self-serving values. If we have followed him at all, we know he steps to the beat of **“a different drummer.”** If we know him at all, how can we be surprised to find that the first are last, and the last are first?

We have privilege and opportunity to do the reconciling work of Christ in the world. We are the means by which Christ gives himself to others. If you feel called to the reconciling work of Christ in the world, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.

PRAYER

We have privilege and opportunity to do the reconciling work of Christ in the world. We are the means by which he gives himself to others. Let us learn from Christ so that we may share his gifts with the world:

Teach us to love by sharing your gift of forgiveness.

Teach us to love by sharing your gift of peace.

Teach us to love by sharing your gift of courage.

Teach us to love by sharing your gift of truth.

Teach us to love by sharing your gift of faith.

Teach us to love by sharing your gift of hope.

Giver of life, we acknowledge that you are the Source, Guide, and Goal of all things. Every day you shower your creation with more gifts than we can name. Accept our gratitude for the gift of yourself to us in Jesus Christ. In him we find all the gifts necessary to live lovingly, meaningfully, peacefully, and usefully. May we in turn share these blessed gifts with others. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.