

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
“FACING THE FUTURE”
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
NOVEMBER 7, 2010
Luke 20:27-38
ALL SERVICES**

We all have a past and a future. Some of us live more out of the past, and others of us live more into the future. Each of these two orientations is inadequate alone. Both give meaning to life in the present. Biblical faith is based on memory and hope. Faith involves remembering what God has done, and anticipating what God will do. In time, past, present and future, there is a complex process of divine and human interaction. God is involved with our lives here and now.

The Sadducees anchored their faith in the past and did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. Jesus challenged them to a better understanding of God, and the One who is Lord of the past, the future, and the age to come.

Few things have fascinated us as much as the possibility of life after death. It has never been an exclusively religious concern, as surveys reveal. An afterlife is a subject of almost universal concern and of unending speculation. Naturally, there has been greater interest in the nature of heaven than hell, since most people are relatively confident that if heaven exists they will be there!

Our references to *“heaven”* run the human gamut; from the genuinely sublime to the simply mundane, to the utterly profane. *“Heaven”* is frequently used in light conversation: **“The resort where we stayed was like heaven!”** It appears in jokes: **“Two golfers began to speculate on whether there is golf in heaven . . .”** In *New Yorker*-style cartoons showing St. Peter at heaven’s gate and ex-mortals with wings and haloes. And in movie and novel titles: *Heaven Can Wait*, *Heaven’s Gate*, etc. It is as if everybody needs heaven for one reason or another.

At more serious levels the subject of heaven can frustrate our efforts at understanding. A child’s first question about heaven is, **“Where is it?”** If we try to answer this question we will appreciate how profound it is! Heaven, like God, is

as impossible to locate as to define. We are dealing with eternity, which is the realm of ultimate mystery. Heaven is not a place. A place exists in space and time and is subject to other finite realities. Heaven is beyond our earthly frames of reference, such as space, matter, and time. This puts it well beyond our capacities to perceive or comprehend.

The fact that heaven is a transcendent mystery beyond even our imagination makes it inevitable that we will fashion concepts of heaven all our own. We elevate our favorite pastimes, or food and drink, or beautiful places to what to us would be a celestial level, and then have an ideal heaven of our own making. Sydney Smith once said, **“My idea of heaven is eating foie gras to the sound of trumpets.”** We would do well, however, to remember the words of Scripture: ***“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him.”*** (1 Co 2:9)

Jonathan Swift wrote, **“What they do in heaven we are ignorant of; what they do *not* we are told expressly, that they neither marry, nor are given in marriage.”** He was quoting Jesus from today’s Gospel lesson. The background of Jesus’ statement is interesting and important. In Jerusalem the supreme court of the Jews was the Sanhedrin. It was comprised of two religious-political parties, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The Pharisees were primarily involved with the synagogues and the teaching of the Law of Moses. They accepted the oral tradition of the law and believed in a general resurrection. The Sadducees, on the other hand, were responsible for the temple and its many functions. The high priest, who presided over the Sanhedrin, was a Sadducee. The Sadducees rejected the oral tradition and accepted only the Pentateuch as authoritative. They did not believe in a resurrection of the dead. The riddle that they put to Jesus was a ploy they used with the Pharisees, to embarrass them on the subject of the resurrection and the age to come. The hypothetical situation was based on the obligation of levirate marriage as prescribed in Deuteronomy 25. If a husband dies, his brother is obligated to marry the widow. If a son is produced by this marriage, the child is named for the deceased brother.

Jesus responded to the riddle with a simple affirmation of heaven as a realm where humans are transformed and are no longer concerned with such earthly things as marriage. The only family in the age to come is the family of God. God is the only parent and all who have been resurrected are children of God. Jesus then challenged the Sadducees’ rejection of the resurrection. He appealed to the Pentateuch, which they accepted, and quoted Exodus 3:6, where the Lord claims to be the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The point was that these three

patriarchs, having died, are yet alive, because God is the God of the living, not of the dead.

As confusing as this passage may be to modern ears, it provides an important perspective on facing the future, the age to come, or heaven. Of course, much about it is simply beyond our comprehension. Life as we know it is transformed into a transcendent reality. It is not unlike expecting infants in the womb to understand the world into which they are about to be born. It is a ridiculous suggestion. Yet that world is real, as they will one day discover. In much the same way, we are incapable of understanding the larger life of the world to come, but this does not make it less real.

The one thing we know of heaven is that God will be there; all in all. The veils of our humanity will fall away and we will see God *“face to face.”* To be in heaven is to be in God. It is to be absorbed into the Divine Presence. God is the Source, the Guide, and the Goal of all things. God is the One from whom we come, and the One to whom we go. God is our home. This is all we need to know.

This present age is full of signs pointing to heaven. Joseph Addison wrote of music: **“Music, the greatest good that mortals know, / And all of heaven we have below.”** We also sense something of heaven in genuinely good and loving people. All of us have known individuals - - a mother, a father, a friend, a mentor - - in whom we sensed dimensions and depths we could only call sacred. This is one of God’s greatest gifts. **“Of this blest man, let his just praise be given, / Heaven was in him, before he was in heaven.”** (Izaak Walton)

The Bible, from beginning to end, portrays God as alive and active in creation and in history. As creatures made in the divine image we have a unique capacity to anticipate the future, to plan for the future, and to help shape the future. Yet so many people live exclusively in the present. Human life is not one-dimensional, but three-dimensional. God is the central reality in our past, our present, and our future. God is Source, Guide, and Goal of all things.

I invite you to come and grow your spirit with us as we face the future together with God. If you are willing to help shape that future, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.