

“Sharing heaven”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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*Isaiah 65:17-25 and Matthew 25:31-40*

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

When your ministry team met on Monday and prayed, there was a shared theme among many: concern for our nation and the election the next day. I can’t imagine why. I mean, everything is so harmonious right now. Everybody respects facts and works together across differences for the common good, honoring each other’s humanity, even while engaging in critical thinking and rigorous debate... Yeah... Of course we know that American democracy has never been perfect, but it feels especially broken right now. We imagine that it may be what it felt like pre-Civil War—the caning of Senator Charles Sumner, anyone?—and we do not want a repeat of that, especially since those of us who err on the side of love and kindness probably would not fare well in that scenario.

It is providential, then, that we find these words from the prophet Isaiah this week. Isaiah paints a beautiful picture, in which all are fed and housed, living long and joyful lives. It is a vision in which peace and concord prevail, and premature death is no more. But, as we are so keenly aware this week of all weeks, this is not our world. People are hungry and homeless. They do not enjoy the fruit of their labor; many lack a living wage. They experience violence and discord. They die. We just marked All Saints Sunday and Veterans Day, and remembered many taken from us far too soon.

Just this week, I was talking with a person who is deep in debt for medical bills from a time they didn’t have insurance. Now they’re trying to provide for their family, all on their own, and the hospital wants to garnish the very wages that are necessary for their family’s survival. All because healthcare is seen not as a right but a privilege in our nation.

Just this week, a deacon spoke of college students who are homeless; they can’t find anywhere to live. The shelters are full; they don’t qualify for assistance; and there’s a lack of affordable housing. And now they’re expected to go to class after spending the night shivering under a bridge.

Just this week, I spoke with people who are tired and overwhelmed, who are grieving and lonely, who are sick, who feel like a mess.

God makes a promise, but it has not been fulfilled yet. Life can feel broken. Why doesn’t God get around to fixing it?

Well, what if we acted on the presumption that God is? What if we acted on the presumption that God is here right now, knitting together love and purpose and opportunity? God’s coming into your broken life. God’s walking through the door.

How will you know him?

Jesus says, “Just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.” *When you fed that hungry person, that was me. When you welcomed that stranger, or cared for that sick person, or made that person who felt so scared and vulnerable feel safe, that was me.*

This is why, whenever someone comes into Westminster for our Personal Care Pantry, Susan Marteney tells her volunteers, “That’s Jesus who just walked in.” She tells them to show respect, look them in the eyes, ask their name, give them yours, smile, treat them like a person, not a number but a vessel of the divine.

That exchange of love between two people is a God moment. It is a moment in which the kingdom of heaven—the vision of Isaiah—breaks into our world and shines bright and steady. Through you. For a moment, there is peace. The veil of this sad existence is pulled back, and joy pours in.

It’s like that moment in the Book of Genesis, when Jacob returns to his brother Esau, from whom he stole his birthright, and Jacob sees Esau approaching with 400 men, and he’s sure that Esau is going to attack and take his vengeance. But to Jacob’s surprise, Esau runs to him, lifts him high in the air (remember Esau is a big guy) and hugs him tight. He kisses his brother, and they both weep. Jacob, receiving this unexpected love and forgiveness, says, “I have seen your face, which is like seeing the face of God” (Gen. 33:10).

Jesus says that God’s reality is reaching out from you, trying to love through you. Each person you meet is also God, giving you someone to love, someone to run to and hug. And when that happens, it is heaven on earth. We are not mortals then, but angels. We become God seeing God—the God in me looking out at the God in you.

This heaven can manifest anywhere, at church, at the soup kitchen, on the street, at work. For Caryll Houselander, it happened while riding a train in London in the first half of the 20th century. She writes, “All sorts of people jostled together, sitting and strap-hanging—workers of every description going home at the end of the day. Quite suddenly I saw with my mind, but vividly as a wonderful picture, Christ in them all. But I saw more than that; not only was Christ in every one of them, living in them, dying in them, rejoicing in them, sorrowing in them—but because He was in them, and because they were here, the whole world was here too... all those people who had lived in the past and all those yet to come... I had long been haunted by the Russian conception of the humiliated Christ, the lame Christ limping through Russia, begging His bread; the Christ who, through all the ages, might return to the earth and come even to sinners to win their compassion by His need. Now, in the flash of a second, I knew that this dream is a fact... Christ is everywhere; in Him every kind of life has a meaning and has an influence on every other kind of life.”

Jesus tells us to live as a glimpse of this new heaven and earth. Be in the broken one now but act like you belong to the other. Act like each person you encounter is Jesus, and these are the plains of heaven. Then, though the world may not reflect this vision, you will. It will be like a little

heaven in you. You can actually share heaven with each other, every time you care, every time you are kind or just.

“Remember the truth that once was spoken,” they sing at the end of *Les Misérables*, “To love another person is to see the face of God!”

Isaiah’s prophecy begs the question: How will people be fed and sheltered, protected and loved? Jesus answers the prophet’s question. “By you,” says Jesus. As St. Teresa of Avila once said, “Christ has no body but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes with which He looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which He walks to do good. Yours are the hands with which He blesses all the world.”

By you, says Jesus. But—and this is very important—not by you alone. Individually, we are limited. We get impatient, selfish, tired. We look, not with God’s eyes, but with the eyes of judgment or defensiveness. Yes, we are the body of Christ, but as the Apostle Paul tells us, we are not the body entire; each of us is but a member. Christ is the head, and only together are we the body. This exchange of heaven will be done by God in us, as the church collective, with the shared grace and power of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus is keen to remind us where that grace comes from. He reminds us in Matthew 25 that the people coming into our lives, the people who are hurting and in need, they are the bearers of God’s grace; they are the pathway to heaven—not as some crude reward system, but as the relationship that brings heaven alive on earth. They aren’t taking; they are giving.

When we realize that every person who walks through that door was placed there by God to give us something we desperately need, and when we meet them with love, when we see them as a person made in the image of God, deserving of our attention and care, then we have hope. This doesn’t just mean doing what another asks. Sometimes, tossing money at someone isn’t an act of love; it’s an act of dismissal. Rather, learn their story. Eat a meal with them. Find out what they really need to be self-sustaining, to have justice, to thrive and be well. Work with them to achieve that.

There is much we cannot control, only lament. There remains within our power only this: the choice, as Christians, as the church of God, to model a radically different way of being, the Way of Christ. It is a way of peace, of love, of justice, of truth and conscience, submitted to the collaborative processes of community, the spirit of humility, the joy of difference, and our shared deference to God. Every time one of us walks that Way, there is hope.

Every time one of us walks that Way, we share heaven. And when enough of us share heaven, heaven becomes reality. **Amen.**