

---

## *Heaven is Real...It's Hell That's a State of Mind!*

**A sermon by Canon George Maxwell**  
**Last Sunday after Pentecost – Year A**

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

There is an old story about a Christian missionary who goes to a remote island in the South Pacific, where he has heard there is a tribe that has never heard about Jesus, a tribe that has never been visited by anyone from the West, from the civilized world. So he goes to tell them about Jesus.

He arrives. He spends time with them. He gets to know them. He tells them everything that he knows about Jesus. And then it's time for him to leave.

As he walks out with the king of the tribe to the beach and prepares to disembark, the king looks at him and says, "Wait a minute. Let me get this straight. Before you came, I didn't know anything about God, I didn't know anything about sin, and I wasn't going to Hell."

And the missionary says, "Yes, of course, you can't be held responsible for what you didn't know."

"Well then," the King says, "now that you've told me about Jesus and God and sin, if I don't believe what you say, I'm going to Hell?"

"Yes," the missionary says. "That's how it works."

"Why," the King says, "did you bother to tell me?"

Which suggests I think that just believing in Jesus is not enough for salvation, not enough really to experience Heaven. So what is?

We seem to have an answer to that question in our Gospel reading for today, the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats. For it is in that reading that all of the nations of the world, which is to say, all of the Gentiles who didn't otherwise believe in Jesus are gathered before Christ for their judgment.

And they're separated one from the other, the sheep from the goats, the righteous from the unrighteous. Which would suggest that there are some who are righteous, who are living in a way that brings them to Christ, that when confronted with Christ, they are accepted.

But what's interesting about this story, at least to me, is it both the righteous and the unrighteous, the sheep and the goats, are surprised. Neither understands what they have done.

Some have fed and clothed and given drink to Jesus. Others have not, because they have not tended to Jesus's family, which is to say the church of Matthew's community, a group of poor and isolated Christians who were persecuted by the society in which they lived. Those who were befriended and served this group have been found righteous. Those who opposed

them have been found unrighteous.

So what's in it for us? What do we learn now that we are not that community, now that we are not the ones being persecuted by society?

What's in it for us, I think, is a sense of what the presence of Christ really is. What is it that everyone appeared before, and how is it that some were righteous and some were not? What does belief in Christ or good works to others have to do with salvation, with Heaven?

C.S. Lewis answers this question in a very imaginative way in his book *The Great Divorce*. In that book he gives us a picture of Heaven and Hell.

Hell, he says, is a dark and dreary place where people go who are quarrelsome, where they become more quarrelsome, where they tend to separate from each other, become less human. And, in becoming less of themselves, they become opaque. You can almost see through them as they become less and less human.

Heaven on the other hand is a place of light, a place where people become more, where they become firmer, where they can follow their joy, their desire for God further and further into the great mountains beyond.

But these two places are connected.

In fact, they're really the same place. Hell is just really small. And every day, those who have elected to go to Hell are allowed to come up and experience Heaven and they will be met there by someone who is in Heaven, somebody from their past, who beckons them to stay, because they always have a choice.

In the very last scenario in the book, there is a wonderful example of this meeting. There is a meeting between a woman whose name is Sarah Smith. We are told that she has more joy, more desire for God in her pinkie than is necessary to bring all of humanity, all of creation alive. She is bright. She is full. She has come back from her journey to this place in order to meet somebody.

And then we see another being—two of them actually—coming to meet her. They're ghoulish in appearance, one tall and one very small. The tall person appears to have the small person by a chain, dragging him forward.

But as she reaches out and calls the name of Frank, her husband when she was alive on Earth, we realize that Frank is not the tall one. Frank is the small one.

Frank is a dwarf ghost who simply uses this taller ghost as his mouthpiece, as his persona. Frank is so used to being false that he carries his own falsehood with him as a front, that he uses to speak.

And when they meet, there is this plea by Sarah Smith for Frank to stay, to join her, to experience her joy, her desire for God. But Frank, all he wants to know is that she misses him. All he wants to know is that she needed him. All he wants to know is how this affects him.

“Stay,” she says.

“You're only saying that because you need me,” he says, refusing to love her.

Do you see that? Refusing to stop thinking about himself long enough to think about her or even God.

He needs to know that he has power over her. He needs to know that he can manipulate her. He thinks that his whole life is dependent upon being able to coerce her. A

As he speaks he becomes smaller and smaller and smaller. Finally Sarah Smith in all her bright glory must kneel on her knees in order to continue to speak to Frank.

But he only wants to know if she needed him, if she loved him.

She says, “Forget about all of that. There is Heaven that awaits you. Heaven is the ultimate reality. Heaven is where you will experience God. Don't worry about yourself right now.”

And as he begins to fade away, she has to get onto all fours in order to continue to engage him. Yet, she does.

“Stay,” she says. “It is your choice. Heaven is the ultimate reality. It is the truth. It is the life. It is the way.”

As he shrinks away back into the grass, the last thing he says to her is, “You have to say that because you need me.” And then he vanishes, as if he has one last triumph.

Somehow, he thinks that he exists because she needs him, not because he loves her or God.

Heaven is the reality. It's Hell which is a state of mind.

Heaven is the place that we can choose to be, not because we believe in God, or even because we did good works, but because we become new people.

This is the promise of our faith: that we become new people. We become people who can see others in ways that we didn't before. We become people who can love others in ways that we could not before. We become people that so embody God, who are so full of love and light that others can see it in us. That is our missionary work. That is our witness—to embody life to such a degree that others can see it in us and in the way we treat each other.

It's not that Jesus, standing there as a truth, separates people, sheep and goats, righteous from unrighteous. It is that we, standing before Jesus, make our choice.

Lewis says they are two kinds of people: those who say to God, “Thy will be done,” and those to whom God says, “Thy will be dying.”

Heaven is the reality. Hell is the state of mind. The choice is ours.

Now, this is not new revelation. This is wisdom that the spiritual path has yielded for many, many generations.

There is an ancient rabbinic tale which says that at judgement day, we will appear before God. God will not ask us any questions. God will not pull out a scroll that chronicles everything we have done, wrong or right, through the course of our lives. God will simply look at us in the face and see how much God recognizes of himself there.

God will simply look at us and see how much of God we reflect back to him.

This is Heaven: to be new people, to be so full of God that we reflect God back, not only to God but to others. The choice is ours.

Amen.