

A Sermon By Rev. Jim Hickman
Corona United Methodist Church
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Headin' For Heaven
I Corinthians 3:10-15

Last week I came home from work and found a car parked in front of our house where I normally park. I knew it was the day for Girl Scouts to be meeting next door and figured that this was a mom picking up her daughter. So I pulled on in the drive way, figuring I would park out front later. I needed to bring the trash cans out and as I did so, the woman apologized to me, and I said, "No problem." But I thought,

No problem. And besides, if I yell at a Girl Scout mom I will lose my status as a nice guy and probably won't get to go to heaven...

Now that last statement, "I will lose my status as a nice guy and probably won't get to go to heaven..." pegs me as a modern religious person. I have some vague idea that going to heaven has to do with being a nice guy. It is right up there with my neighbor whose license plate frame says,

I died and went to golf heaven.

Where is golf heaven? I thought heaven had something to do with being alive in the spirit and with God. I guess there are alternatives.

Likewise, there was the book that was really popular some years ago:

A man died and he got to revisit six experiences from his past to see them

More objectively; to see them and resolve them as positive experiences.

It was a good book, but after I read it I realized there wasn't anything about the man or the experiences that gave *any* indication of why he should have survived death in the first place. Again, isn't the after-life about being alive in the spirit and God?

You and I don't talk much about heaven. I think we assume it and I suspect most of us in this room have an awareness that that is where we are headed. But even if we are in our sixties or seventies, death and heaven seem a long time in the future so we don't worry too much about it. What we don't seem to pay attention to is the fact that for the twenty or thirty year old issues of death and dying are so far removed it isn't even an issue for them. I think we need to talk about heaven and life and where we are going. In doing so, I think we need to face two false assumptions most of our friends, neighbors and family members make:

- We don't need to think much about what happens in death/where we are headed when we die because it is such a long way in the future.
- We don't need to worry about where we are going in death because everybody—well almost everybody—is going to heaven.

It is a long way in the future. That's the way it seems. The vast majority of Americans do not know anyone who has died. Grandma and Granddad are still alive, the people who died last night in the car crash or gun fire don't live in our neighborhoods—we don't know them. Even the teenagers who died a couple of weeks ago and the news covered the upset fellow students. It was sad, but in fact we can guess that few students knew those who were killed because in a school of 4000 you didn't really know the kids

at the other lunch time or across the quad. The fact is, most people around us have no idea that they are going to die someday.

In the circles that most of us run in this ignoring-the-fact-I-will-die tends to give people a false security that we don't have to worry about what happens to our spirit/our soul in death because there is plenty of time to take care of religion

- when the kids are grown
- when we retire
- when we've taken care of the folks
- when we finally slow down....

It is a false assumption that we have time.

I've talked about the common belief in our society that everyone will go to heaven before. But I still think it is an issue. I have to deal with it because I am asked to do funerals for people I don't know. In visiting with the family they will assure me that

Although mom didn't go to church, she was a good person. She went to Sunday School when she was a kid, and she was a good mother.

The obvious implication being, "So of course she will go to heaven." It isn't even a question.

Now you and I know that the final answer to that question belongs to God.

But you know, If I were to answer our wide spread assumptions about "going to heaven" I think I would turn to what Paul says in our scripture reading this morning. He talks about passing through or being subjected to the fire—the refiner's fire. You know what a refiner's fire is? It is the fire gold or silver smiths use to burn away all the junk—a fire that leaves just the precious metal. The Bible talks about the Final Judgment using this image in several places:

- The prophet Malachi says "...who can endure the Day of His coming? Who can stand when God appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire... (Mal 3:2ab)
- And the writer of I Peter says, "...that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold which though perishable is tested by fire, to rise to the praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ." (I Peter 1:7)
- And Paul in I Corinthians "...if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones [those elements that are valuable; or] wood, hay, or straw [those elements that will not stand up to the fire] each one's work will become known; for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, the fire will test what sort of work each person has done. If the work the person has built on the foundation survives, that person will receive a reward. If the person's work is burned up, that person will suffer loss... (I Corinthians 3:12-15a)

I think in death the life in us is tested by a fire that burns away all the junk. If there is a spirit in us; if it has been cultivated over the years, there is something to survive into eternal life. If not, then all that is left is ash. Jesus says,

"I am the vine, you are the branches. If a person remains in me and I him that person, the person will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, that person is like a branch that is thrown away and withers, such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned."

(John 15:5-6)

You can see the implication. A lot of our friends and neighbors is they sincerely believe they are good people and because they are good they will be welcomed into

heaven. It is a common belief. But what if they had to pass through the refiner's fire? What would survive? What would be left? Is it worth running the risk when they can find life/life eternal right here?

I think we need to talk about heaven and what comes in death. You may not agree with my imagery—other imagery may work better for you. But we do need to talk about these things.

Do we need to talk about them all the time? No. But I do think when we encounter the assumption that everyone goes to heaven or we are given a second chance after death (whether in some sort of reincarnation or like the book, a chance to make everything right), I think we need to simply say, "I don't think that's the way it is..." Take advantage of the opportunity to talk with those around us about this.

We care about people. We love others, we go the distance with them. We live out our lives helping others. But we rarely notice that an awful lot of people are the walking dead. They are dead now. They will be dead when they die. And we don't help them if we don't invite them

to life now,

life lived,

life alive in the spirit, *in The Spirit*

life that carries all of us through death into life eternal.

Let us take a few minutes to reflect on what we've heard and seen this morning.

Amen.