

- Pastor Keith Madsen
Sunday, 08/30/15

“A Place with God”

John 14:1-7

Billy Graham is one of our country's most beloved figures. A few years ago he attended a luncheon in his honor, and he told a story I would like to share with you as part of my message today. It seems that Albert Einstein was once traveling from Princeton on a train when the conductor came down the aisle, punching the tickets of every passenger. When he came to Einstein, Einstein reached in his vest pocket. He couldn't find his ticket, so he reached in his other pocket. It wasn't there, so he looked in his briefcase but couldn't find it. Then he looked in the seat beside him. He couldn't find it. The conductor said, 'Dr. Einstein, I know who you are. We all know who you are. I'm sure you bought a ticket. Don't worry about it.' Einstein nodded appreciatively. The conductor continued down the aisle punching tickets. As he was ready to move to the next car, he turned around and saw the great physicist down on his hands and knees looking under his seat for his ticket. The conductor rushed back and said, 'Dr. Einstein, Dr. Einstein, don't worry, I know who you are. No problem. You don't need a ticket. I'm sure you bought one.' Einstein looked at him and said, 'Young man, I too, know who I am. What I don't know is where I'm going.'"

The old evangelist, who has struggled with his health a great deal in recent years concluded his story by saying, "I not only know who I am...I also know where I'm going."

As Jesus Christ approached his own death on a cross, he knew where he was going. He thought his disciples did too, and so he said to them, "And you know the way to the place where I am going." But as he had on a number of other occasions, Jesus had overestimated the understanding of his disciples. They neither knew where he was going, nor any way to get there.

Now, two thousand years later, at least in some ways, it seems we haven't made much progress. Many people have *some* concept of an afterlife, but the concept is becoming a little hazy, and the question of how to get there has become increasingly disputed. A little while ago Barbara Walters hosted a television special she called *Heaven: Where is it? How do we get there?* Walters spent a year setting up this special. She interviewed dozens of religious leaders all over the world, as well as a number of scientists and atheists. After she was done with it all, Walters, who was not raised with any religion at all, says she had become fascinated with the afterlife. She says, "I've done years of specials...but I care more about this one than anything I have ever done."

Oftentimes those who are young don't think a lot about an afterlife, but then something comes along in their life that makes them pause and reflect. Sometimes it's just getting a little older, and closer to the time we will face death. Perhaps that is the case with Barbara Walters, and why she feels the topic is so important. Sometimes it's a traumatic death which comes into our life, and that can happen at any age. A parent or grandparent dies. A friend from school dies in an auto accident. I think about the singer Eric Clapton, whose best-known song for a long time was about cocaine. Then his toddler son died when he fell from his apartment window. That's when he wrote his most personally touching song, *Tears in Heaven*. In that song, he sang about seeing his son in heaven, but not really feeling like he belonged there himself:

“I must be strong and carry on
'cause I know I don't belong here in heaven...”

When the question of an afterlife becomes relevant to you, where do you go to find answers? What kind of place might this place called “heaven” be? And perhaps more importantly, what can you do to feel like perhaps, just perhaps, heaven might be a place where you can someday belong? As we look at our Scripture for today, we can find some guidance on these questions.

Let's start with the question of what kind of place heaven might be. Perhaps for most of us, we have the traditional conception of a magnificent city somewhere above the clouds, with pearly gates and streets of gold, and many jewel-encrusted mansions. The latter conception comes from our text, where in the old King James Version we are told, “In my Father's house are many mansions...” However, as we look at other translations, we can start to question the literalness of that concept. The New Revised Standard Version says, “In my Father's house there are many *dwelling places*...” and in the NIV, it refers to “many rooms.” But the question we need to ask is, “Is that what heaven is all about -- living in a nice mansion?” I know some people who get pretty bored and feel rather lonely living in nice mansions.

Science fiction writer Robert Heinline, in his book, *Job: A Comedy of Justice*, pictured heaven as boring because all the castles and mansions would start to look the same after a while: “A dozen palaces constructed of jewels can be a dozen wonderful sights, each different from the other. But a hundred miles of such palaces will put you to sleep, and six hundred miles of the same is deadly dull.” Heinline had his character conclude, “I have gathered a strong impression that for most humans, the real problem of an eternity of bliss is how to pass the time.” Similarly, in an old installment of *The Far Side* comic, there was a picture of a guy in heaven, sitting on a cloud and looking very bored. And the guy says, “I knew I should have brought a magazine!”

Even the very word, “heaven” causes problems for many people today. It strongly implies that whatever life we might have after death is physically located somewhere in the heavens, somewhere out in space. Such a conception led to former Soviet Cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin reportedly saying that he had been to space and had seen no God. Certainly if there are Golden Gates up there, they must be a long, long ways away.

The problem of such views is not the idea of eternal life, but the traditional, materialistic view of heaven to which these related. If the idea of eternal life is going to make a difference to people in our country today, it has to emphasize not material rewards – not whether we have a mansion waiting or a room or a dwelling place -- but relationships. What Jesus was saying in this passage from John 14 wasn't about the nature of our dwelling in the afterlife, but it was about the fact that there was plenty of *room for everyone* in the eternal kingdom he was establishing. Some people view heaven as an exclusive club. Its value is in its very exclusiveness, that not everyone can get in. It's like in the old sitcom *Frasier*, where Frasier and his brother Niles always want to get in the exclusive clubs that just aren't available to everyone. I remember they went to one exclusive spa where at first they were in the silver room, but that wasn't exclusive enough for them, so they made their way to the gold room. But they had heard a rumor about a platinum room, and they thought they had to get in that one. But when they snuck through the door, they found themselves locked out of the club entirely, in the place where the garbage was kept! Heaven isn't an exclusive club. It is a place where people like you and me can find a place with God and with each other. Does that make it less desirable? Groucho Marx once said, “I don't want to belong to any club that would

have me as a member.” But doesn’t part of heaven have to be that maybe finally we can come to an understanding that we just might be valuable and worthy enough to God to be in such a place? And, by the way, it’s also a place where many other people we might think of as “riff-raff” will have a place as well. There’s an old story about a group of people who arrived in heaven, and they were being given a tour. And they were shown one beautiful room with large windows, and they were told that was for the Catholics, and they were shown another somewhat different beautiful room, and they were told that was for the Jews, and still another room, and they were told that was for the Lutherans. And then they came across a closed in room, still very beautiful, but without any windows to see the other places, and with a padlock on the door. And so someone asked about that room, and the tour guide whispered, “Oh, that place is for the fundamentalists – we have to be quiet because they think they are the only ones up here!” A big part of the beauty of heaven will be, we *won’t* be the only ones there.

Jesus underlines in our passage the central point of what will be great about eternal life: he says in verse 3, “And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.” An eternal relationship with the one who incarnated love itself. An eternal relationship with the God he came to reveal. That’s what this concept we most frequently call “heaven” is about! It’s about sharing that relationship with loved ones who have gone before us.

Sometimes heaven is presented in very material terms: whatever you didn’t get here, that you will get in heaven. In Barbara Walters’ special, the Muslims, who in this life were supposed to avoid sex and drinking, envisioned being able to have both in abundance in heaven. Many Islamic males believe they are promised 72 virgins in heaven. I guess for more enlightened ones who believe in women actually getting into heaven, it would be 72 house boys, with names like Sven and Fabio!

But the views of many Christians are equally material. A common response of Christians on Walters’ show was that heaven would be great because you would be able to eat anything you want and not gain weight – a kind of Jenny Craig in the sky!

Why is it that the church spends so much energy in this life saying that life that is real isn’t about things, it isn’t about “me”; it’s about relationships, relationships to God and each other? But then when we talk about eternal life, suddenly it’s supposed to be about “me” and things again – *my* mansion in the sky, *my* 72 virgins, *my* pleasures? Life is about relationships! That’s what it’s about in this life, and that is what it will be about in the next as well. I’m not sure that Eric Clapton has any more than a marginal understanding of Christian faith, but I think that at least by his life experience he knows these things. He has access to mansions and worldly pleasures here. What he doesn’t have is his child, the one who meant more to him than all of those other things.

Heaven is relationships – relationships to God and each other. For Cathy and I heaven will mean our parents, all of whom have died, once again. It will also mean seeing my grandmothers, and my nephew Kurt, who loved children and always had a smile, and who died a premature death at age 20; as well as my other nephew David who was an EMT, and Cathy’s nephew Garrison who died in Iraq, but who before he died had a dream of providing assistance to the orphans of the Iraq war. It will be seeing people like Grace Longton, Wilma Hill and Gladys MacKenzie, and others who have been part of this church’s fellowship. I’m sure each of you have your own list.

Losing people in this life brings tears to our eyes and our hearts. But that those relationships can be eternal brings us hope. That's why I believe with Eric Clapton, "Beyond the door there's peace I'm sure. And I know there'll be no more tears in heaven."

But how do we get there? Jesus speaks with a strong voice on this: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me." Believe. This isn't the fairy-dust "believe" where you believe in a fantasy and suddenly it becomes real. This is believing in the author of life itself. This is believing in the Son he sent to open the door to eternal life. Tradition, based on Revelation 21:21, pictures the entry point of heaven as gates of pearl, but that is a metaphor. Personally, I'm not as concerned about the nature of the gate as I am about the nature of the gatekeeper. Who is the gatekeeper? "Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'" He is the gatekeeper. He is the gatekeeper, not as one there seeking to keep out all the "riff-raff", the one securing the exclusive club, but as the one who is there specifically to allow the entrance of all us "riff-raff"! He is there at the gate to say "Come to me all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest." He is there at the gate to say, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world..." He is there at the gate, saying, "Let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes, take the water of life as a gift."