

Cheating Death, Being Transformed
Caldwell Presbyterian Church
May 12, 2013
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture: Acts 1:6-11; Romans 12:1-2

Let me start by expressing my thanks to each of you for being here. In one sense, that's not a bad place for any preacher to begin on any Sunday. But today, most of you, at least, have come back to church knowing that one area of emphasis in today's worship is the question of life, death and what comes next. It's a subject that some just don't want to talk about.

To make matters even stickier, today is also Mother's Day according to the secular calendar. It's a day of celebrating the unique love of our mothers, which we will do, along with some unfinished business on life and death. So, once again, thanks for being here.

Last week, members and friends of this church received a mailing that relates to why we are talking about life and death. Our Congregational Care Committee is encouraging all of us to think ahead about our memorial service after we are gone. We trust that day is a long ways off. In the meantime, we hope it will be a blessing to those who survive us to know our wishes about our memorial service, a time of celebrating both our lives and God's promise of resurrection in Christ

Over the last two weeks, I've invited your thoughts on the matter and a number of you responded. Several of you acknowledged the depth, breadth and complexity of this subject with which none of us has first-hand experienced. Yet, as I said last week, it is human nature to want to try to imagine what happens at the end of this life.

One of you wrote in all capital letters, "I BELIEVE there is a better place waiting for us I feel like I KNOW that I will be met by my family and friends and other relatives I did not get to know in this life." I appreciated the depth of those convictions.

Several of you pointed out that many people harbor a great fear of death. Some made the additional point that critics of organized religion think religion is just a man-made construct to help us deal with that fear.

But, for those who wrote to me, it's clear that faith is real and its promise drowns out any fear of death.

“I have never been frightened by death because the God I believe in will take care of me in death as well as life,” one of you wrote. “There are many things beyond my understanding and (the end of life) is one of them. I will trust God to lead me in this miracle and blessing that is life and I have the same faith in my death. God’s will be done.”

Can I get an “Amen?”

Another one of you had this to say:

“I believe life here on earth is a small, small glimpse of what heaven will be God is just showing me a small part of how happy I will be when I see him.”

These and other perspectives harmonize with that of Kathleen Foster. Foster is a writer who once left the church because of what she calls its “scary vocabulary” - words such as “judgment, faith, salvation, dogma and sinner.” Yet, Foster returned to the church after wrestling these ideas to the ground and making peace with them. In her book titled “Amazing Grace: The Vocabulary of Faith,” she has this to say:

“Heaven seems to be an important construct in the human imagination ... the power to imagine such a heaven is almost heaven enough.”

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Today, appropriately enough, we mark the Ascension of Jesus, a moment that ends the season of Eastertide. Just as there is a 40-day Lenten season that leads up to Holy Week, there is a 40-day season for the church to celebrate the resurrection. Technically, that season ended on Ascension Day, last Thursday. But I figured you wouldn’t want to come to church on Thursday. So we mark it today.

We do so with a passage that begins with our eyes looking up to heaven only to be encouraged to keep our eyes on more earthly things.

As we heard in the reading, the Book of Acts opens with the apostles gathered with the risen Christ. Christ assures them that the Holy Spirit will come upon them as they spread their faith to the ends of the earth. Then, in a scene that mixes mystery with a touch of humor, scripture says Jesus is lifted up into a cloud. Just as quickly, two men in white robes appear and give the apostles a hard time for standing around with their mouths open.

“Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” they say.

This is a timely question, it seems, as we at Caldwell consider life and its end. For all of the importance of that planning – on both practical and spiritual levels –it is as if these same two men in white robes have today appeared right here in Caldwell church.

“Yes, think about the end of life,” they might say. “Plan your memorial service so that it is a glorious and fitting celebration of life and resurrection. But then get back to living.”

Kathleen Norris, the author I mentioned a moment ago, writes:

“Otherworldliness can be a real temptation in religion, but the incarnation itself is a corrective.” The incarnation, she says, is “(d)own to earth, real flesh and blood. And even at feasts such as the Ascension, which might seem otherworldly, the scripture texts are anything but (that). ‘Why stand ye gazing up into heaven?’”

It is, as Foster, says, those two men in white robes are saying “take a look around. Your work is here!”¹

In that same spirit, the Apostle Paul gives us these words in Romans (12:1-2):

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Paul’s guidance has been often summarized that we are to be “in this world but not of it.” That’s a fair summarization, I suppose, but it requires one thing. It requires transformation. Transformation.

I hope that word rings a bell with you. It is one of two “lenses” we are using as a congregation as we go through our “3D” process, a season of discernment, discussion and dreaming. Transformation lies at the very heart of the Christian life. But, because transformation isn’t easy, it often gets overlooked or replaced by activity and busy-ness. You know what I mean. Activity that keeps our calendars full and our minds and hearts

¹ Ibid

preoccupied and distracted from the true call of the Gospel. Busy-ness that means we don't have to slow down and simply "be" with the God who created us and, yes, who offers us transformation. Yes, we post-modern Westerners prefer preoccupation over transformation.

But preoccupation is not what Paul is talking about in the 12th chapter of his letter to the Roman church.

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

In the words of one commentator, Paul calls us to put ourselves entirely at God's disposal, entirely available to God's purposes. In worship here. In worshipping God through our life together as a church. In worshipping God through service to others as the body of Christ.

Transformation – by Christ, to be the body of Christ – isn't easy because its fulfillment requires adopting a set of values and goals that stand apart from those of the world. Values such as less versus more. Values such as hospitality versus hostility, humility versus presumption, love versus hate, even loving our enemies. Values such as justice versus dominion, command and control. Values such as selflessness over self-centered-ness. Values such as the common good rather than me, myself and I. Values such as courage rather than complicity and complacency.

For Caldwell, we are asking what does it mean for a congregation and a church to be *transformative*. By *transformative*, we mean an agent of transformation in Christ and in the name of Christ. We mean a community that seeks to live out the Gospel even if it requires a complete reorientation of our lives and values and goals, even and including sacrifice of those things the world thinks important.

So, friends, as we discern, discuss and dream what it is to be a transformative church, we might ask:

- How can we reorder our lives more around God's work?
- What is the right use of money – our household budgets and our church budget?

- How can our campus be used to extend greater invitation to all of God’s children and to reflect the Kingdom of God?
- How can our public witness more visibly challenge and confront the powers and principalities that undermine what Jesus would do?
- What does it really require of us to raise our children and youth in the light and teachings of our Lord?

You could add your own questions to this list. And I hope you will as we move forward with the 3D process. In turn, friends, we become more of the missional church our mission statement calls us to be. In that sense, these two guiding ideas work hand in hand. To be missional, we must surrender to being transformed. To be transformative as a church, we must be missional, an outward-facing community of believers.

This week one of you reflected on her time at Caldwell in the last five years and that of her family.

“I understand the idea of church being 'transformative' by thinking about what has happened in my life and my family's life because of our relationship with Caldwell and our Caldwell family,” she wrote. “It's not just about feeling comfortable and feeling at home; it's also about feeling challenged to be my best self, for all of us to continue the journey toward what God wants us to be in God's service.”

“For me,” she wrote, “The idea of ‘transformation’ is intensely personal and intensely public. It is a blessing, a revelation, and a responsibility.”

Another of you wrote:

“One of the things I cherish about Caldwell is our avoidance of "mission du jour." We don't have what I consider short-term, feel-good "projects" that serve us rather than those in need. In other words, Caldwell seeks to "touch" those we serve. No, Christmas Boxes for us or winter coat drives; all things that make US feel good but are absent of the connectivity with those in need.”

Can I get an “amen” on that, too?

Those are just some ideas of what it means for a church ... and a church family ... to be transformative, an agent of transformation. I look forward to hearing others in the weeks to come as our 3D conversations continue.

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In closing friends, all of this relates to where we started last week in this way. Yes, we should take death seriously, because that means taking Christ's victory over death seriously, so serious that it transforms our lives.

And, by being transformed in Christ, through Christ, in service to Christ and the Kingdom of God here and in heaven, we can, with God's permission, cheat death. We can cheat death by seeing it not as something to be feared because we are already transformed on this side of the grave, through Christ and, in response, our own sacrifice for and fulfillment of God's purposes.

On this day when we remember Christ's ascension into heaven, we hear the two men from the opening chapter of Acts, those messengers in white robes calling us to focus on this life and leave the next life in God's hands.

As one of you wrote to me this week:

"It's important to prepare (for the end of life) on so many dimensions, but not to fixate on the when, how, where or why. The most important preparation is the journey of faith; hearing the Lord's call and following obediently, stumbling, dusting yourself off, confessing and trying a bit harder."

That, friends, is transformation.

In the name of our risen Christ, Amen.