



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
 Asheville, North Carolina
 19 August 2018
 Sermon: Questions for God – “Eternity?”
 Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

Ephesians 5:15-20
 John 6:51-58

- *God - since I do not crave eternal life, am I lost? I crave life and meaning here and now.*
- *When I encounter people who cannot accept belief in a loving God, due to all of the pain and suffering in this world, I have come to believe that the only answer to satisfy that concern is eternity. In the light of eternity all can be put into perspective (along with a loving God). Am I on the right track?*
- *Where do we go when we die?*

I struggle with these questions. Because, honestly, those preachers who have all the answers to questions about heaven, who can tell you what the streets are paved with, who can tell you the names of all the relatives who are waiting for you, who can tell you the one way to get to heaven, the right prayer you have to pray to get to heaven, all of that, they were the ones who made me want to run from the ministry before I ever got started.

Have you ever felt stuck at a funeral with a preacher who tells you about the streets of gold and the streetlights of crystal? I have. In fact, I presided over a funeral like that; my grandfather's funeral was like that. Let's just say that my grandfather was a complicated man. I can say that loved my grandfather, but in a

few key moments of his life he also caused a great amount of pain to various members of my family, and he had died very well off, living comfortably in a gated community in Florida. My family asked me when I was fresh out of seminary to co-preside his funeral with another family member. When it came time for that family member to do his part, he had clearly seen a different and better side of my grandfather than I had, so he read from John 14, but he read from the King James Version, so what he read was “In My Father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you.” Then he imagined my grandfather in front of his own heavenly mansion, sitting on the porch, drinking lemonade in front of a golf course. Perhaps that was a comforting image to some of our family members there, but it made me feel nauseous. Is that really how it goes? You die in one mansion, and you hurt some people along the way to get there in this life, and then in the next, it’s all sipping lemonade on the golf course?

We all know heaven has often been used to prop up the status quo. The pioneering liberation theologian Howard Thurman famously said that his grandmother, a woman who was freed from slavery and was a devoted Christian her whole life long, refused to read the letters of Paul because Ephesians 6 tells slaves to obey their masters. The letter goes on say that the good that slaves do for their masters will be rewarded in heaven, and God will punish their masters in the next life for any oppression that slaves suffer in the here and now. “I promised my

Maker that if I ever learned to read and if freedom ever came, I would not read that part of the Bible,” Thurman recalls her saying.¹ In such ways, heaven has been used as a substitute for justice, and for care, and for responsibility in this life, in our lives today. This is why anti-racist writers like Ta-Nehisi Coates warn against referring to heaven when thinking of the injustices of the past. I’ve read these lines before from his letter to his son in a past sermon, but they deserve a second hearing: “You must resist the common urge toward the comforting narrative of divine law, toward fairy tales that imply some irrepressible justice. The enslaved were not bricks in your road, and their lives were not chapters in your redemptive history. They were people turned to fuel for the American machine.”² In other words, Coates is telling his son, don’t look away from past injustices. Don’t look to a heavenly judgment, because that certainly can be a way of looking away from what happened, what our country did, what our descendants did, and what we continue to do today. Don’t look away, Coates tells his son. Remember.

So I struggle with these questions. And, as I often do, when I am struggling with deep, theological, pastoral questions, I turned to the stacks, wading my way through the catacombs, dusting off the volumes. Yes, I turned to Netflix. This

¹ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), p. 31.

² Ta-Nehisi Coates, “Letter to My Son,” *The Atlantic* July 4, 2015,
<http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/07/tanahisi-coates-between-the-world-and-me/397619/>

² Ta-Nehisi Coates, “Letter to My Son,” *The Atlantic* July 4, 2015,
<http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/07/tanahisi-coates-between-the-world-and-me/397619/>

week, my almost three-year-old son and I watched Disney-Pixar's recent film *Coco*, the story of a young boy in Mexico named Miguel who is transported to the Land of the Dead on Dia de los Muertos, the Day of the Dead. On this day, spirits of deceased family can visit their living relatives in land of the living. But in order for spirits to cross over, according to tradition, pictures of these deceased relatives must be present within the home, to show that they are remembered and honored. So Miguel, with the help of his spirit guide, a street dog whom he appropriately names Dante, cross into the Land of the Dead to connect with a lost relative who has all but been forgotten by his family.

The movie is beautiful. It's the type of animated film that you can just cry buckets over, when you see spirits of grandmothers exclaiming how big their grandsons are getting, when you see spirits relieved to learn their families have not forgotten them, as they see their pictures on the mantel. I found myself understanding the film in two ways. On the one hand, I read it as metaphor. The spirits were personifications of our living memories, because our loved ones live on in our memories. The story, and the tradition it embodies, tell us that we don't die when we live on in the people who love us. So, for example, I often lament that my son will never meet my grandmother, his great-grandmother (the grandmother on the other side of the family whom I called Memaw), at least not in this life, because she died just a few years before he was born. But, I can promise that he

will know her, because I will tell him stories of her love for me and our family. And on an even deeper level, he will know her love because she taught me so much about what it means to love your family. My grandmother was really the only grandparent who ever showed much interest in being in my life, but she loved me with a deep and abiding love that I carry within myself today. And because of that, I carry her spirit within me, and her love is alive when I find the strength to show that love to others. When I show the same love that I learned from her to my son, and perhaps to his children, she will be present, her love will live on well beyond her years on this earth.

To the person who wrote the question about not craving eternal life in the traditional sense, I can understand that. At times, I wonder if this is what eternal life is, that when we leave this world with more love than we found it, we live on, beyond our years. This is not the life-after-death that is often taught by our faith, I get that, but, I ask, is it any less real?

But there is another way to understand this movie, and I also know that it is too simplistic to flatten out the wisdom of our religious tradition, and other traditions that speak of God's eternity, by understanding them simply in metaphorical terms. In other cultures, and in our own religious heritage, there is a real sense that God's eternity interfaces with our own lives, both in our living and on into our deaths, though in many cases we put the emphasis in the wrong place. We

think of God's eternity as bearing on our deaths and the deaths of those we love, and while that is certainly true of the promises of God, those promises are much more about the lives that we live today than about the distant future, the end of the age.

So Jesus, early in his ministry in the Gospel of John, tells those around him that when we share in his life, we already have eternal life, for as he says, they "abide in me, and I in them." And this is the gift of Christ, the one who promises to take us into the presence of God at the end of the age: that future begins now. With his whole life, Jesus brings the presence of God right here, into our lives, into your and my life today. Eternal life is not then just a distant future, but it is an eternity that has become present: "And the word became flesh and dwelt among us."

Eternal life in John is also not something stagnant; it is certainly not about granting eternity to the status quo, nor does it have anything to do with the upper class dream of lavish living and retreat. Eternal life challenges us to live lives of faith, to put our trust in God's love, even when that trust calls us to challenge the unloving ways of this world, when it means following the man who threw out the money changers in the temple, as he did just 4 chapters before our verses today in the gospel. It means putting our trust in the man who disrupted the religious and political establishment of his day, who told his followers to emulate and learn from rather than forsake those who are meek, those who are last, those who are

forgotten. “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.” And though this sounds like cannibalism, it is instead a promise of eternal life, right here, today, when you trust in the one who proclaims that God is with us.

So, to the person who asked what happens to us after we die, I do not think Scripture gives us a clear answer to that question, or rather, Scripture gives us many, often conflicting answers to that question. That’s actually the point, because apocalyptic literature is not just about eternity in the future sense, but about how God’s eternity speaks into our present. Every prophetic text, from Isaiah to Revelation, from the Daniel to Paul, was speaking also to its own time and place, telling us what God’s eternity means, for example, for the Jews in exile in Babylon, or for the early church under the tyranny of Rome. If we take them as timeless blueprints and start drawing maps of heaven, we are asking the wrong questions. Those texts were written to tell their readers, and to tell us today, what God’s eternity means for our present, what does it mean to trust that the presence of God has come near?

In fact, despite the oftentimes-conflicting pictures that Scripture’s many voices give us of the end of the age and of heaven as they proclaim God’s eternity, there this a common thread running through it all. That thread is trust. In life and in death, God calls for our trust. Trust that the God who brought us into life also stays

beside us through the whole of our lives; trust that this same God will also not forsake us in our deaths, but will rather bring us into God's presence in the end.

What does that trust mean to us today? Some of you may remember the last time I preached I spoke of trust in God's presence during harrowing experiences when I worked as a hospital chaplain. I spoke of God's presence in the midst of tragedy, God's presence in the midst of suffering and grief. I stand by that message, but I am afraid that it gave a skewed picture of the trust that we are called to proclaim, because, while there is a certain faithful trust that we are each called to in the lowest of our valleys and the highest of our mountains, there is also a day to day trust that is not any less profound.

Yesterday, we said goodbye to this church's oldest member, Mrs. Virginia Bradley, a member of this church for over 60 years. All week, I've been hearing memories from our members about Virginia, about the communities she formed and cared for at this church; how she would invite, pick up, and drive new members to her circle; how she would supervise and help cook countless meals in our church kitchen; how she threw parties at the beach; how she cared for her elderly in-laws and then her mother, taking them into her home; how she went back to work at the fabric shop after she was widowed in her 50s and then worked well into her 80s because she loved people and fashion. Virginia lived the life of

faith, of trust. You can see trust in God and a love for God's people as a thread, weaving together all the stories I have heard of Virginia.

I did not know her until she was a hundred and one years old, but every time I saw her, Virginia was wearing the prayer shawl that our knitting group gave to her, around her shoulders. I sometimes wonder, if I live a long life, how I will approach my final years. What will I regret? What will I fear? How will I face my own death? I witnessed how Virginia faced years 101 and 102. They were years of trust, and of prayer, and of community. They were years of eternal life, years trusting that God was always near, and that God would be there through the end.

How do we think of God's eternity, even when we don't have all the answers to the questions we ask, when we are not sure? The answer is that God does not ask for our certainty, but rather for our trust, our trust that in life and in death we belong to God. Let us live in that trust, today, and in all the seasons of our lives. Amen.