

ON EARTH, AS IT IS IN HEAVEN

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

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Lately I've been thinking about community and about belonging, and about the paradoxes and ironies that are part of life. These topics keep bubbling to the surface; I notice these themes in conversations I'm having, podcasts I'm listening to, articles I'm reading. I'm going to try my best to weave a few of these strands together this morning, including our scripture passage, and ask you to join me in praying that the result is a message that both makes sense and is helpful to you.

This thought pattern began last week when our parish nurse, Cheryl Updegraff, was on the phone with a woman who works in a facility for seniors. This woman was seeking help for a new resident of their facility; she had heard good things about our church and felt comfortable asking us if we would help this gentleman, even though he was not a church member, even though she herself was not a church member. Cheryl talked to the woman for quite a while, assuring her that we would reach out and follow up on her request, which we did. After Cheryl told me about this conversation, I sent an email to the woman. I wrote to her - "I hear that you have some curiosity about our church. I'd love to meet with you and get acquainted and answer any questions you might have."

This was part of the email I received back: "Thank you for reaching out. I told Cheryl UCC is the ONLY church I would EVER even consider joining IF I were to find

my way back to organized religion. Give me some time to mull this over - I am so heart-sick by what is going on in this country with faith-based organizations it has left a bad taste in my mouth. I need some time to figure out what works for my soul, but I am very open to keeping a space ready for UCC in the near future.”

I was struck by the woman’s honesty and forthrightness. Her words moved me, both because of who she is and because those few sentences in her email capture what many people think and feel about Christianity today. They associate church with the worst of our nation’s problems. They believe that not only are Christians not speaking out loudly enough about racism, homophobia, climate change, economic injustice and other issues but that often people who call themselves Christians are making those problems worse. The younger the person, the more likely they are to hold these opinions.

So it’s becoming more challenging for us as a church to tell people that we are different, we are trying to be open and inclusive, we are trying to be part of the solution...but it’s hard to spread that message right now...this is the reality of this moment in American life. Many people associate Christianity with hate groups and they are suspicious, cautious and resistant to the very words we might use to invite them to learn about a church that is different. I love this banner produced by the UCC; we have a version of it in our front entryway: <https://images.app.goo.gl/LiYeWSe8XWWbV83T7>

At the same time that people are resistant to church, there is a deep hunger for community and for belonging. Here’s one irony. The church at its best offers welcome,

acceptance, fun experiences, and meaningful opportunities for service...just what most people say they need...yet many people are convinced that church is not for them.

The longing for community is universal - we see it in people of all ages, we see across genders. Because we're lifting up our new men's ministry focus today, I re-watched a TED talk I'd remembered. This is Robert Waldinger, a psychiatrist and the fourth Director of the Harvard Study of Adult Development. Harvard has been conducting an ongoing study for 75 years, tracking the lives of 724 men, asking about their work, their health, and their home lives. Studies like this are exceedingly rare. Almost all projects of this kind fall apart within a decade because too many people drop out of the study, or funding for the research dries up, or the researchers get distracted, or they die, and nobody moves the ball further down the field. But through a combination of luck and the persistence of several generations of researchers, this study has survived. About 60 of the original 724 men are still alive, still participating in the study, most of them in their 90s. And they are now beginning to study the more than 2,000 children of these men. Waldinger says that after tens of thousands of pages of interview transcripts, one result of the study is clear. Happiness is not about wealth or fame or hard work. It's simply this. "Good relationships keep us happier and healthier."

People who are more socially connected to family, to friends, to community, are happier, they're physically healthier, and they live longer than people who are less well connected. And the experience of loneliness turns out to be toxic. Statistics show that people who are more isolated than they want to be from others find that they are less happy, their health declines earlier in midlife, their brain functioning declines sooner and

they live shorter lives than people who are not lonely. And the sad fact is that at any given time, more than one in five Americans will report that they're lonely.

I encourage you to take advantage of the opportunities for relationship-building that we offer here. Join Bible study or a book group, throw an axe, join the choir or band, be a confirmation mentor, volunteer at the Thrift Shop...I can't offer you a more diverse set of experiences than those. If you're not sure where you fit in, contact a church staff member; we'd be happy to help you.

Our scripture for today gives us an idea what life was like in the early church. It was a community of outsiders; they did not fit in with the world around them - in fact, they were often persecuted. Yet the church grew in numbers and in the intensity of their internal relationships. The author of the book of Hebrews is writing to encourage the early church community to keep the faith. Most likely, members of this community are not afraid for their lives, but they **have** been persecuted because of their Christian faith. Their possessions are being stolen, they're being ridiculed, they're facing hostility because they follow Jesus. Their values are at odds with the prevailing culture. The book of Hebrews says to them, "Remember Abraham and his faith. He became an outsider, too - living in a tent, not knowing where God was sending him. Remember Sarah - she was asked to believe an outrageous promise."

"God was with them," Hebrews says, "and God is with you too."

Here's something we forget about these ancestors in the faith - they were asked to believe that God was at work in the world, and believe it without seeing much evi-

dence of it. “Go”, God told Abraham. “Leave this land behind and I’ll make you the ancestor of a new nation.” “Go,” God told Moses. “Lead your people through the wilderness and I’ll take you to Canaan, the promised land.” Moses followed God for 40 years and then died without having stepped foot into Canaan. Another irony of the life of faith.

Here’s how the book of Hebrews puts it - “They were strangers and immigrants on earth; they were looking for a homeland, longing for a better country, a heavenly one.”

From the time of Abraham on, from the time the book of Hebrews was written on, people have thought about heaven in two contrasting ways. Sometimes heaven is seen a reward for good living or a refuge from a traumatic life. It’s seen as a **future** existence of comfort and peace.

There’s another way to look at heaven, and that is to try to make **this** earth more heaven-like, a place of comfort and peace for ALL God’s people. That’s what we pray every Sunday when we say, “God, YOUR kingdom come, YOUR will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” We’re not just praying for our own salvation; we’re praying, really, for revolution. For the world to turn upside down so that it looks the way God wants it to, the way God created it to be.

We can only work for God’s realm, for a more heaven-like earth, if we realize fully that the things of this world are not going to satisfy our deepest longings. When we’re so comfortable here that we really don’t see a need for things to change, it’s hard for us to be motivated to work for peace and justice.

People of faith are strangers in this land, never fully rooted. We are, as Jesus said, “in this world but not of it.” We know which taxes to pay to Caesar, but we know too that our hearts and souls belong to God, and it is from God that we receive our values and priorities, our marching orders, and our road maps. When we’re close to the heart of God, we’ll hear the cries of the people who want desperately to belong to a community that cares about the poor and the marginalized. When we’re close to the heart of God, we’ll hear the cries of those who are lonely.

As tempting as it is to fit in, to belong, take a good hard look around you. Do you really want to invest everything you have in **this** world? In this world where the rich become richer and the poor are despised? In this world where nothing matters more than greed and power? Where the cries of the God-created earth itself are ignored in favor of the profit margin?

There are moments when we glimpse how different things could be, moments of heaven on earth. You stand at the edge of an unpolluted lake, and listen to the sounds of the birds and the wind. You engage in conversation with someone you thought you knew and were sure you disliked, yet you find some common ground and you each learn something from the other and you look forward to next week when you’ve agreed to talk again. There are those pieces of music that touch your heart, the sound of an old friend’s voice, the laughter of a child. The news story about a problem solved because of advances in science and technology. Glimpses of human life at its best. What if all of earthly existence was like those moments of heaven?

We're all just wanderers on this earth, not meant to be fully at home here. So let us reach out to one another in kindness, knowing that life can be hard for all of us. Let's extend a warm welcome to those who doubt, those who believe differently, those who don't know if they believe at all, those who have been rejected by other churches and all who have been outcast and wounded.

It's another ironic paradox: the less at home we feel in this world, the harder we will work to make this world reflect God's values, and when people outside the church see what we're doing, they'll want to be a part of it too, and our community will grow...this will become even more our home away from home. May it be so. Amen.