

Welcome to week two in our ongoing experiment in online video worship at UUCA. I'm Rev. Mark Ward, lead minister. I hope that you are well and able to find good company and finding time to enjoy the wonderful weather we are blessed with.

We continue another week working with theme of Wisdom in our worship, and this week we'll be looking for what wisdom we can find when thinking about the idea of heaven. Our topic is "The Problem with Heaven."

It is a trying time for us all as we cope with the consequences of the pandemic COVID-19 coronavirus. Not only are we washing our hands all the time, it seems, but we're all coming to terms with living day to day apart from each other in a way we've never been before: social distancing we're calling it. It is necessary, we know. If we're lucky it could reduce the amount of death and disease that this outbreak brings.

But it's also a poignant reminder of how much it means to be in touch with each other. I mean really touch: Hands held, cheeks kissed, hugs shared. Amid all this "distancing" we risk also losing the connections that being together really means. So, please, as you observe, as you should, all the precautions to keep yourself healthy, find ways to keep your heart connected: smile, laugh, check in on old friends, new friends, tell them how much they matter to you. So that when we're cleared to hug again, that hug will mean so much more.

MEDITATION

In Heaven by Mark Belletini

Ah, it's true.

When our ancestors spoke of heaven,
they were speaking of this moment.
When they went on about nirvana
they imagined a time like this.
When they sang of paradise,
it was this morning they imagined.
A time when all the mysteries of life and death
are blended in a community of praise,
when the bones of ancient lovers
are given flesh again in our own bodies,
teachers of long ago speaking of love and truth
once more in lives so ordinary they are
extraordinary.

Blest is our breath, in and out, quiet,
blest is our sitting, our fidgeting, our movement,
blest is our heartbeat echoing
the pounding alleluias of the distant stars,
blest is the silence that is presence,
not absence.

THE PROBLEM WITH HEAVEN

“Heaven,” wrote David Byrne of the band, The Talking Heads, “is a place where nothing ever happens. . . . The band plays my favorite song. Play it one more time, Play it all night long.”

Heaven is one of the great memes of our culture: the pearly gates, St. Peter with his ledger book, angels fitting newcomers for wings. But if truth be told, despite strident sermons of evangelicals and polls reporting that a vast majority feel sure they are going there (nobody thinks they’re going to the other place) there remains a deep ambivalence among most people about what to make of it.

Not only do many of us doubt that any such place exists, it’s not really clear why we’d want to go there. As the Talking Heads song suggests, if it’s a place where our favorite song is the only song we hear, it’s going to drive us crazy before long.

Our early Universalist forebears spent much time struggling with questions of the afterlife. That’s because their theology was grounded in the notion that a loving God would not consign his creations to eternal torment. This thinking, though, ran straight against the popular sense that without the fear of hell no one could be persuaded to be good.

The Universalist Hosea Ballou used to answer this charge with a story: He said that he was once riding the circuit with a Baptist minister, when the other man looked over at him and said: “Brother Ballou, if I were a Universalist and feared not the fires of hell, I could hit you over the head, steal your horse and saddle and ride away, and I’d still go to heaven.”

Ballou replied that: “If you were a Universalist, the idea would never occur to you.” After all, from a pragmatic perspective, lots of people are raised with the fear of hell, but it doesn’t seem to do a very good job of deterring criminal activity. Experience shows that as good behavior comes about not because of the threat of punishment but as the result of teaching a strong personal ethic.

Similarly, it is not the promise of heavenly reward that leads people to behave well, but a belief that good acts are rewarded by the difference that they make for themselves, others and the community. In the end, not only are they implausible, but the notions of heaven and hell don’t really accomplish much for us, besides generating needless anxiety and fear.

The philosopher Martin Haggland takes this argument a step further. He says there are good reasons why we should have no interest in heaven, and they have to do with the life we are living now.

We’ve all had wistful moments after some major event in our lives, and we find ourselves reflecting, “Ah, life is too short.” Haggland would have us attend to that moment and see in it the kernel of meaning for our lives.

It is, he says, the very fact that our lives are finite that makes them so sweet. Compare it, he says, with how it would be if we existed in a state where we never died. "I could never take my life to be at stake," he said, "and I would never be seized by the need to do anything with my time."

He points to an article in *U.S. Catholic* magazine that asks, "will heaven be boring?" And it replies, "No," because in heaven souls are called "not to eternal rest, but to eternal activity – eternal social concern."

But, Haggland says, that's the problem: there is nothing to be concerned about in heaven. In heaven, concern presupposes the thought that something can go wrong or be lost, but of course it won't: you're in heaven!

Also, eternal activity is of concern to no one since it has nothing to do with us specifically. It began long before we got there and doesn't require our assistance to be maintained. Nothing we would do would matter. "Far from making my life meaningful," he said, "eternity would make it meaningless, since my actions would have no purpose."

This brings us back to how we live now. Haggland argues that a sense of what he calls "shared finitude" is necessary to cultivate a demand for mutual care. We wouldn't act on behalf of others if we didn't think that it made a difference that we did.

"It is because I am finite that I am in need," he says. And "it is because I recognize you as finite that I can understand that you are in need and that it matters how I treat you."

He calls it "the center of a spiritual life" that we recognize our responsibility to each other. And that is possible because we recognize that our actions matter, that we can't depend on anything or anyone else pulling the strings to make it better.

This concept is not so strange to religion as it might seem. It's worth remembering that in the Christian scriptures there are multiple times when Jesus counsels his followers to seek heaven not in some distant place but within their own hearts or, "amid you." My colleague, Rev. Marilyn Sewell, argues that these verses are evidence that Jesus' teachings were centered not on urging individual salvation but on building and strengthening relationship.

The Universalists of Ballou's generation made a similar argument: we each create our own heavens and hells in how we behave with each other in our time on Earth. That's what Tracy Chapman's song, "Heaven" points us to: "We are the spirit, the collective conscience. We create the pain and suffering and the beauty in this world: heaven's here on Earth."

We are each the angels in each other's lives, "ordinary people living ordinary lives: filled with love, compassion, forgiveness and sacrifice."

We could hardly find a better time, as we hunker down seeking to avoid COVID-19, to be reminded how important we are to each other's lives. Each call we make to check in on a friend, neighbor or relative, each elbow bump, namaste, or peace sign in lieu of a hug or handshake, washing our hands, covering our coughs is more than self-protection: it is a sign of caring, a commitment to stay connected.

And we do all this not to build chits for another life but to make the lives we have more joyful, more beautiful, more fulfilling.

Years ago in a workshop I came upon a song written by Barbara McAfee based on a Navajo chant that I think summarizes this sensibility:

"When you were born you cried,
and the world rejoiced.
May you live so that when you die,
the world cries and you rejoice."

May you rejoice in your beautiful life, in the beauty, the wonder, the compassion, the hope, the justice, the joy that you helped make possible.

Meanwhile, as for how our lives conclude, none of us knows what to expect. It is a mystery to us all. But I like the image that the British poet John Masefield offers in this sonnet:

It may be so with us that in the dark,
When we have done with time and wander space,
Some meaning of the blind may strike a spark,
And to death's empty mansion give a grace.
It may be that the loosened soul may find
Some new delight of living without limbs,
Bodiless joy of flesh-untrammelled mind,
Peace like a sky where star-like spirit swims.
It may be that the million cells of sense,
Loosed from their many year's adhesion,
Pass each to some joy of changed experience,
Weight in the earth or glory in the grass;
It may be that we cease; we cannot tell.
Even if we cease, life is a miracle.