

This morning I am going to venture into dangerous territory and beg your patience as I do so. I know a great deal about a few things and a little bit about a lot of things. That makes me a pretty good Trivial Pursuit player and an armchair devotee of the T.V. show, Jeopardy. I like to flatter myself with the belief that I received a pretty good liberal arts education. But....of all the things I do well and of all the things I do less well, the very bottom of the list is anything grammatical. When my grade school teachers asked us to open our grammar books, I must have been looking out the window. When they taught that lesson about sentence structure and pushed the importance of sentence diagramming—remember that (?)---I must have been absent that day and during the week they laid out the parts of speech, I must have had the measles or maybe the mumps. If I learned anything at all about adverbs, adjectives and gerunds it was because the people who did pay attention and did learn those lessons—have been patient with me and kind and caring. So, I ask for a bit of that same patience today, because my sermon idea is about the difference between a noun and a verb.

I think I know that a noun is that part of speech that includes persons, places and things and if I remember correctly a verb is a state of being or an action. Taken superficially, you and I are nouns. I am standing in a pulpit and we are sitting in a church, up there is the steeple and you are the people. There is the table which some call an altar. On the table are candles and there's a cross. This is my sermon. And those are just a few of the nouns that surround us.

The subject of my sermon today is heaven and heaven is a noun. In classical religious terms some folks will tell you it is a place and for some people who love Jesus, it is a destination. Some will tell you that have to do things to get there. I was taught and maybe you were too, that if you live a good life, heaven is where you end up when this chapter of life is over. The streets are paved with gold, the houses there are mansions and even those of us who can't manage a tune in a bucket get to join the heavenly host, pick up our golden crowns and harps and spend eternity hanging out. Does that sound wonderful to you?

There's an old preacher's joke about the preacher who got wound up one morning on the subject of heaven. He got his congregation all stirred up with his picture of heaven and then shouted at the top of his lungs, “If you're ready to go to heaven, stand up.” And everyone stood up except an older man in the front row, who didn't even stir. And that bothered the preacher and so he pointed to the man and said “Why aren't you standing, brother?” And the man answered: “If you don't mind, pastor, for the present I'm doing fine right here.” And I guess I feel the same way.

And while if you asked me about heaven, I would invite you to wonder with me about what it might mean to imagine a place of joy and reward and a destination where the pain and sorrow of this life will be replaced with something a whole lot better than what we have here, I do confess that I am not anxious to get there. I look forward to heaven, but heaven can wait because life is good and I'm not quite ready to make the trip.

And that's the thought that came to me as I looked at the parable we heard just now and at the whole string of little parables Matthew share about the Kingdom of God or the reign of God. Jesus did say a few things about heaven as a noun. He did offer a few glimpses of the other shore, but the funny thing I noticed as I was preparing for today is that most of what Jesus said about heaven had absolutely nothing to do with a place or a destination. He never talked about streets of gold. He never mentioned harps or halos and when he did talk about the Kingdom of Heaven he mainly talked about this life and this place as if heaven was right here and right now and not up there or out there somewhere in a place a whole lot better than this place. He actually said that the Kingdom of Heaven is within—in the heart and in the mind and in the soul of every one of us.

And if I asked you now to open your heart and your soul and your mind do you think you would find heaven there? I took a look inside and I have to say that what I saw didn't leave a whole lot of room for heaven. In fact what I saw was a little scary. I saw some fears about the future. I saw a bundle of worries over things I've done and said that I wish I had not said or done. I saw a pile of regrets and a swamp of inadequacies. I saw a dozen or two doubts and a dried out stack of disappointed dreams. Did

you ever notice that when you go looking for trouble, you usually find it? That when you believe the glass is half-empty it usually is or when you think negative things, negative things happen?

Well, I don't think Jesus looks at us in that way. I think when Jesus looks at your life and mine the first thing he does is look right past all of those negative things and Jesus sees heaven—not as a place, not as a destination, but as a living reality. Not as a noun, but as a verb. And here I am at the very edge of my grammatical ability and at the far side of my ability to understand or to communicate, but the heaven that is in you and in me is about loving, caring, serving, giving, forgiving, and living to make all of those things real possibilities in our own lives and in the lives of other people and out there in the world.

Do you want to go to heaven? Let me say it simply: if you want to get the noun, become the verb. If you want to lead your life in the sure and certain hope of eternal life right now and in the world to come whatever that looks like, don't worry about heaven the place, be heaven, become heavenly, live your life 'heavenescently'.

Forgive me, I think I just created a new word. I think you know the word: "effervescent"—it means bubbly, sparkling, engaging, thrilling, lively—the sort of person who makes an entire room come to life with their joy. Well, 'heavenescent' is living so fully in the present that nothing this life can throw at us can cloud the powerful reality that we are God's children called to be Jesus to one another in every part of our living.

And so Jesus a little earlier in Matthew, says the Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed—that little wonderful spark of the divine in you and in me. Jesus says the Kingdom of Heaven is like yeast—that tiny miracle of life added to the ordinary substance of life that transforms every moment with life renewing possibility. Jesus says that the Kingdom of Heaven is like treasure hidden in a field—and the hidden treasure is the power of love to make everything worn out and weary in our hearts into something bright and beautiful. Jesus says, the Kingdom of Heaven is like the pearl of great price—a treasure so precious that just having it puts every single thing in your life and mine in perspective. And then finally in answer to Peter's attempt to build the reign of God into a noun bound box of religious rules and regulations about how often we need to forgive, Jesus tells a wild tale of extravagant love known as the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant that breaks open life with grace that is amazing.

And all of that is an invitation to live heaven and do heaven and in our very humanity become heavenly.

Heaven is not a noun, it's a verb. When your dreams are dashed and you keep on dreaming, that is heaven. When you think you can't forgive and you forgive anyway and keep on forgiving, that is heaven. When you know that despite what you have done in the past, you hear Jesus promising you that you can begin again, that's heaven. When you come to believe that even your worst nightmare will have a happy ending, that's heaven. When you lay your head down at night and never worry whether you'll wake up or not because you know God loves you, that's heaven.

When you come to realize that you can be the missing piece to another creature's puzzle, that's heaven. When you give someone else the permission to be themselves in your presence without pretense or phoniness, that's heaven. When you realize that because God accepts you as you are and you come to accept others, that's heaven. When you give another person the strength and the courage they need to take an unpopular stand and join them in letting the love of God get a hearing in this cold cruel world, that's heaven. When you overwhelm another person's cynicism with understanding and compassion, even if you disagree with them, that's heaven. When you give yourself away without any thought of return, that's heaven. When you become an answer to another person's problem or their prayers, that's heaven.

When we look around this place and realize that our job as the church of Jesus Christ is not to judge but to care, that's heaven. When we get together to make a difference in this community in our mission and in our service, that's heaven. When we pray together and trust the power of our prayers, that's heaven. When we speak the truth in love to one another, that's heaven. When we sacrifice our cherished opinions and love our enemies beyond any logical expectation, that's heaven. When we stand up for the poor, or those who lack health care or confront the haters and the hoarders with powerful love in action, that's heaven. And even when we feel like we're walking the very streets of hell and know that on that walk we are not alone, that's heaven. Heaven is not a noun, it's a verb.

Let me end now with a story you may have heard before. It was told first in the writings of the poet and scientist Loren Eiseley. (The Star Thrower)

“Once upon a time there was a man who was walking along a sandy beach where thousands of starfish had been washed up on the shore by a storm. He noticed a boy picking the starfish one by one and throwing them back into the ocean. The man observed the boy for a few minutes and then asked what he was doing. The boy replied that he was returning the starfish to the sea, otherwise they would die. The man asked how saving a few, when so many were doomed, would make any difference whatsoever? The boy picked up a starfish and threw it back into the ocean and said: ‘Made a difference to that one....’”

“The man left the boy and went home, deep in thought of what the boy had said. He soon returned to the beach and spent the rest of the day helping the boy throw starfish into the sea...”

God in Jesus Christ is calling us to life. Who we are is whom God loves and heaven is in our loving. God give us the strength to be heavenly. Amen.