

If Life is Not about Heaven, What are We doing Here?

The Rev. Dr. June Christine Goudey May 28, 2006

Matthew 13: 44-52

The Parables of the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl

44" The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.

45" Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. 46 When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.

The Parable of the Net

47" Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. 48 When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away. 49 This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous 50 and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

51 "Have you understood all these things?" Jesus asked.
"Yes," they replied.

52 He said to them, "Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old."

Ignorant before the heavens of my Life

Ignorant before the heavens of my life,
I stand and gaze in wonder. Oh the vastness
of the stars. Their rising and descent. How still.
As if I didn't exist. Do I have any
share in this? Have I somehow dispensed with
their pure effect? Does my blood's ebb and flow
change with their changes? Let me put aside
every desire, every relationship
except this one, so that my heart grows used to
its farthest spaces. Better that it live
fully aware, in the terror of its stars, than
as if protected, soothed by what is near. *by Rilke*

Welcome to Jeopardy's special UCC Simi edition! If you answer every question correctly...you'll win a special one-way trip. Are you ready? Our first answer is: heavens...and the question is? (Pause) Next answer: heaven....question? (Pause) Answer: kingdom of heaven ...the question is? (Pause) The final answer: St. Peter...question? (Pause) Speaking of St. Peter...

A man arrives at the gates of heaven. St. Peter asks, "Religion?" The man says, "Methodist." St. Peter looks down his list, and says, "Go to room 24, but be very quiet as you pass room 8." Another man arrives at the gates of heaven. "Religion?" Baptist." "Go to room 18, but be very quiet as you pass room 8." A third man arrives at the gates. "Religion?" "Jewish." "Go to room 11, but be very quiet as you pass room 8." The man says, "I can understand there being different rooms for different religions, but why must I be quiet when I pass room 8?" St. Peter tells him, "Well the Jehovah's Witnesses are in room 8, and they think they're the only ones here.

Jokes about heaven have come to be a religious staple and St. Peter the greatest gate-keeper that ever lived. Here's another example: Recently a teacher, a garbage collector, and a lawyer wound up together at the Pearly Gates. St. Peter informed them that in order to get into Heaven, they would each have to answer one question.

St. Peter addressed the teacher and asked, "What was the name of the ship that crashed into the iceberg? They just made a movie about it."

The teacher answered quickly, "That would be the Titanic." St. Peter let him through the gate.

St. Peter turned to the garbage man and, figuring Heaven didn't *really* need all the odors that this guy would bring with him, decided to make the question a little harder: "How many people died on the ship?"

Fortunately for him, the trash man had just seen the movie. "1,228," he answered.

"That's right! You may enter."

St. Peter turned to the lawyer. "Name them."

I've been thinking about heaven more and more these days. No, I'm not worried if I'll make it in or not. I've got that one figured out...My real concern is that more and more people seem to have confused heaven, with the dwelling place of God and God with heaven. **God created the heavens. Human beings created heaven...the difference is huge!**

Ann and I saw the film version of the Da Vinci code the first night it opened. That's where I picked up a fancy million dollar note put out by Fight the Good Fight Ministries. Their website www.Davincicon.com offers this food for thought:

“IS IT POSSIBLE THAT THE DA VINCI CODE IS THE FULFILLMENT OF A MUCH LARGER CODE THAT REVEALS THAT SATANIC FORCES WOULD ONE DAY DECEIVE THE ENTIRE WORLD?”

“The Da Vinci Con: Hollywood's War on God,” is a mind-blowing, eye-popping documentary that reveals how satanic forces are using Hollywood's most memorable movies and most popular actors to propagate an ancient lie in fulfillment of biblical prophecy.

Learn how these movies are initiating the masses into a Gnostic worldview that will culminate in a "strong delusion" as the world joins Satan & the final Antichrist in their war on God.” Such titles include:

Ron Howard & Tom Hanks' - *The Da Vinci Code*

Keanu Reeves' - *The Matrix & Constantine*

Jim Carrey's - *Truman Show*

Toby McQuire's - *Pleasantville*

Arnold Swarzenegger's - *Total Recall*

J.K. Rowling's - *Harry Potter*

According to Fight the Good Fight Ministries the most important decision we make in life is the decision to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior so that “our endless tomorrows will be spent in heaven not hell.”

“Our hearts cry and earnest prayer is that you will benefit greatly from this web site. Stand with us as we fight the good fight, exalt Jesus Christ and seek to rescue as many souls as possible from Satan's clutches (2 Timothy 2:26) and from eternal damnation in the lake of fire (Jude 23).”

I'm pretty sure that most of you here do not spend your days wringing your hands over this decision, but there are people who do and some of them may even be related to you by birth. **Remember: God created the heavens. Human beings created heaven...the difference is huge!**

We also need to be aware of how people think about heaven because these issues are playing themselves out politically right in front of our eyes. When George Bush tried to rally the world to fight terrorism... he said there was no room for neutrality in the war against terrorism. “All nations, if they want to fight terror, must do something.” “Over time it's going to be important for nations to know they will be held accountable for inactivity,” he said. “You're either with us or against us in the fight against terror.” Bush's words hearken back to the words of Jesus in Matthew 12: “Whoever is not with me is against me.”

The Da Vinci Con folks say the same thing. There is no middle ground when it comes to Jesus. “To not make a decision to follow Jesus Christ is to make a decision against him....To follow him is to enter the narrow gate of heaven. Yet I repeat: **God created the heavens. Human beings created heaven...the difference is huge!**

I have a confession to make this morning: since the day I walked away from the image of a judgmental God when I was in my 30's, I've been walking on middle ground. And contrary to the opinions of some the ground is steadier there than many Christians have been led to believe.

The journey from life with a judgmental God-image to where I am now was a difficult onemake no mistake about that! But I assure you that it is worth every ounce of effort you can muster to find peace of mind here and now. Why make the journey? Because: **God created the heavens. Human beings created heaven...the difference is huge!**

Ironically, those who quote this small section of scripture don't take the time to ask why Matthew did a little editorializing when he borrowed from the earlier written Gospel of Mark. According to Mark's version, Jesus said. "No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, **for whoever is not against us is for us.** Do you hear the difference? In Mark, Jesus said whoever is not against us is for us. In Matthew: Jesus said, whoever is not with me is against me. We are not just talking middle ground here...we are looking at a landscape radically altered by fear.

I say again: **God created the heavens. Human beings created heaven...the difference is huge!**

This past week, as several of us gathered for our Bible and Beyond discussion, I found myself face to face with “no middle ground thinking”. A young man joined us because he wanted to give testimony to his own journey and his decision to follow Jesus. He had come to our community dinners and now felt compelled to sit with us around scripture. Needless to say there was much awkwardness as we made room for Samuel and his points of view which were very different from the rest of those who had gathered.

As we looked at last week's scripture reading, Samuel got more expressive while the rest of us watched quietly. There came a point, however, when our attempts at being gracious had to be joined and I spoke more directly to Samuel's views. The turning point for me was Samuel's amazement that I did not believe life was a test and that our primary goal in life was to get in to heaven. I spoke without anger, but I spoke clearly.

No, I do not live in fear; no, I do not believe that Jesus will come again to judge me.

No, I do not believe that scripture has all the answers and is the only place to turn to learn about God.

It helped that almost everyone else in the room shared my perspective, but it was still necessary for me to speak to my own truths. I learned long ago that we are stronger in what we affirm than what we deny. That means it is not enough to say what I don't believe...it's absolutely essential that I learn to speak of that which I do believe. Now you may dismiss that point with the obvious duh! You are the pastor, June; you are supposed to know what you believe. But let me remind you, you need to know what you believe too, because ... (and I'm not the first one to ever say this) you may be the only Bible someone else reads.

You may be the only Bible someone else reads!

Your life needs to be consistent with what you believe. Say one thing and do another and what do people remember? That's right...what you did. But before you go off on a guilt trip remember this: **God created the heavens. Human beings created heaven...the difference is huge!**

If you want to have more peace of mind, more freedom, and more joy in your life, let me suggest you forget about heaven and consider the heavens. Consider the loving God who created the heavens and the earth and all living things, including you, and called all of creation very good. Reflect on your personal actions, take them seriously, change your ways, and live with God here and now.

Scripture is not a blueprint for how to get to heaven; it's not even a map for how to find God. Consider the evolution of our thoughts about heaven in these brief examples.

In the beginning God created the **heavens** and the earth. [Genesis 1:1-3](#)

To the LORD your God belong the **heavens**, even the highest **heavens**, the earth and everything in it. [Deuteronomy 10:13-15](#)

Look down from **heaven**, your holy dwelling place, and bless your people Israel and the land you have given us as you promised on oath to our forefathers, a land flowing with milk and honey." [Deuteronomy 26:14-16](#)

The LORD will open the **heavens**, the storehouse of his bounty, to send rain on your land in season and to bless all the work of your hands. You will lend to many nations but will borrow from none. [Deuteronomy 28:11-13](#)

O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the **heavens**. [Psalm 8:1-3](#)

You made him a little lower than the **heavenly** beings and crowned him with glory and honor. [Psalm 8:4-6](#)

Now I know that the LORD saves his anointed; he answers him from his holy **heaven** with the saving power of his right hand. [Psalm 20:5-7](#)

"Behold, I will create new **heavens** and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. [Isaiah 65:16-18](#)

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." [Matthew 3: 1-3](#)

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of **heaven**. [Matthew 5:2-4](#)

Jesus replied. "But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of **heaven**." [Matthew 26:63-65](#)

While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into **heaven**. [Luke 24:50-52](#)

I am the living bread that came down from **heaven**. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world." [John 6:50-52](#)

But our citizenship is in **heaven**. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, [Philippians 3:19-21](#)

The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his **heavenly** kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen. [2 Timothy 4:17-19](#)

But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new **heaven** and a new earth, the home of righteousness. [2 Peter 3:12-14](#)

Then I saw a new **heaven** and a new earth, for the first **heaven** and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. [Revelation 21:1-3](#)

[Revelation 21:2](#)

I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of **heaven** from God,

Here is my point: [See how easily heavens become heaven.](#)

"Behold, I will create new **heavens** and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. [Isaiah 65:16-18](#)

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Matthew reinforced the notion of heaven by changing Mark's references to the kingdom of God to read the Kingdom of Heaven... Matthew is also the only Gospel to give St. Peter the keys to heaven.

"I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

Overtime, kingdom of heaven language replaced kingdom of God language...and the church became the kingdom over which St Peter presided. The rest is history...heaven became the goal of the Christian life rather than the experience of God's realm, God's presence, God's justice here and now, which is what the kingdom of God is all about.

God created the heavens. Human beings created heaven...the difference is huge!

When we lose sight of the heavens God created, we lose our ability to see God in all of creation, even in ourselves. When we lose sight of the kingdom of God, that which is near and now, as well as coming and not yet... We lose sight of God in our midst. And when we lose sight of God in our midst here and now **we relegate God to a man-made heaven.**

When we force God to dwell in heaven, we force ourselves to live with an absent God. We imprison ourselves in a world without God's presence, all for the sake of a heaven that has nothing to do with the very God who created the heavens and the earth. When we lose contact with the realm of God in this life we lose the gift of life as well. Eternal life becomes our goal not abundant life. **God created the heavens. Human beings created heaven...the difference is huge!**

If you live this life as preparation for the next you'll miss the only life God created. **God created the heavens. Human beings created heaven...the difference is huge!**

There are those who would have us believe that Jesus came to earth for one reason—to die for our sins so that we can escape hell and go to heaven. They would also have us believe that life is test that all suffering is a lesson, that God wants each of us to find Jesus and be saved. Don't believe it for a minute! **God created the heavens. Human beings created heaven...the difference is huge!** Why is the difference huge? It's huge because human beings also created the concept of hell. **Heaven and hell are two sides of the same coin and both of them have human fingerprints all over them.**

If life is not about heaven, what are we doing here? I believe we are here to praise the living God, the creator of the heavens and the earth. I believe we are here to embrace the abundant life God offers.

As the psalmist proclaimed, "how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens...You made human beings a little lower than the heavenly

beings and crowned us with glory and honor.” Jesus came not to die for our sins but to embrace life. He calls us to do the same!

That’s what we are doing here...discovering the amazing grace of God, that is available to everyone, no matter what faith they follow, what country they live in what lifestyle they espouse and who they vote for. It matters what you believe, my friends; and it matters how you live out your beliefs. Don’t be afraid to question your own beliefs and don’t be afraid to stand up for what you believe. **God created the heavens. Human beings created heaven...the difference is huge!**

May the God who created the heavens and the earth bless us all as we embrace life’s abundance and life’s joy. Amen.