



**“How Big, How Near Your Heaven?”**

***The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring  
Eden United Church of Christ  
Hayward, California***

***Fifth Sunday after Easter 2007  
May 6, 2007  
Acts 11:1-18; Rev. 21:1-6***

You may have noticed that Christians around the world are engaged in a vigorous and ongoing debate about heaven. This debate is easily observed in the headlines of major newspapers, in conversations among friends and family, and in a survey of biblical literature. We participate in and overhear this debate in our time, but it has been underway for centuries.

If you are a dabbler in cross-cultural studies or an observer of the world’s religions, you no doubt are aware that 21<sup>st</sup> Century Christians do not have a corner on the market of eschatological conflict. Intellectual debates, culture wars, and border disputes in our time, and across time, have more often than not been grounded in disagreements about heaven.

Today’s scripture readings point to this debate within early Christianity, which continues to this day. This debate, simply stated, has to do with two issues: is there a limit to the number of people going to heaven, and what is heaven’s address—is it here on earth or in the hereafter?

II

The book of Revelation offers two options for us to consider regarding heaven’s address. One is a place beyond this earthly realm in which the elect are gathered up and taken away after we die, or after the Armageddon, and the other is a heaven that comes right here on earth. Today’s scripture reading from Revelation 21 depicts the latter version—of heaven descending on earth.

If you have been hanging around here for a while and paying attention, you have probably noticed that we at Eden Church and in the United Church of Christ tend to believe that heaven is a place where all souls are gathered and commune with God once we die, and that we gain a glimpse of heaven on earth through the Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion, through participation in Christ’s ongoing mission, and through the loving relationships and works of justice in which we participate.

This belief is at the heart of our Eucharistic celebration, and is one of the reasons that we celebrate an open communion table to which everyone is invited. This belief is also at the heart of our social ministry. We do not believe, as some Christians do, that salvation is only for the hereafter. We believe that God loved the world so much that God came to us in human form and that God longs for us to realize the hope that Christ expressed for one and all, right here on earth.

The evangelist, John, to whom the authorship of the book of Revelation is attributed, stakes the claim in chapter 21 that heaven's address is right here on earth. "And I saw the holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God...And I heard a loud voice saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals'" (Rev. 21: 2-3).

Stated plainly, John explains that God longs for us to see, hear, touch, taste, feel—experience—heaven right here, right now.

If we dare to entertain John's vision of heaven on earth today, if we open our hearts to the Spirit's presence in the Sacraments, and if we pause and notice the significance of this rededication day in the 142-year life of our church—then I believe we may be able to grasp the significance of John's image of heaven come on earth.

## II

While the passage from Revelation deals with heaven's address, the passage from Acts 11 depicts a tension among the early apostles about who the target audience is for Jesus' message and ministry, and ultimately who's included in heaven's census.

In Acts 11 Peter recites his conversion experience, in which he turned from a belief that the gospel was only intended for Jews to a belief that the gospel was meant for Jews *and* Gentiles alike—indeed, for everyone.

Peter, like the other disciples and the apostles, was a Jew. He and they understood themselves initially as reformers within Judaism. Their "target audience" for evangelism was other Jews, not Gentiles.

Imagine the confusion, perhaps even the sense of betrayal, that the other apostles felt from Peter when they learned that he had been in Jerusalem eating and drinking with Gentiles.

Imagine further the significance of Peter recounting how at Cornelius' home (the Italian centurion, who was the first Gentile convert) he (Peter) had a vision from God in which he was directed to share table fellowship with Gentiles.

Imagine that—imagine a leader among the leaders of a Jewish reform movement—receiving a vision from God directing him to eat non-kosher food, to enjoy table fellowship with Gentiles, and to share the good news of the gospel with the whole world.

To some of us such an assertion may seem like a no-brainer, but it was the most radical assertion known to the early apostles, and it is likely only because this assertion was embraced that Christianity survived beyond the first century, or that we are here today worshipping in a Christian Church espousing a message of God's radical inclusivity.

#### IV

In broad brush-strokes, Peter and his detractors represent the two polarities reflected in the debate over heaven's census. On the one extreme, there is a sense that only the chosen, only the elect, are going to heaven (and this number is very small). On the other extreme, there is a sense that everyone's going to heaven. Theologians refer to the first example as "the doctrine of the elect," and the second as "the doctrine of universal salvation."

Think for a moment about what you were taught in the religious community of your childhood, or from the larger culture—especially if you were not raised in a faith tradition. Remember what you were taught about heaven, about who is in favor with God and how many are going to heaven.

Were you taught that the number was very small, or very large, or somewhere in between? When you have that sense, remember where you perceived yourself to be among those options. Were you one in that number that was going to heaven or not? Was your salvation assured or in question?

The good people among whom I grew up were not the type to lean into conflict, and merely represented different shades of Mainline Protestantism, so I didn't fully understand until I went away to college just how vigorously the debate was being waged over heaven's census and its address among Christians.

My discovery of this vigor is epitomized by several late-night conversations with my first college roommate, Dinah Choduer, and her friends.

I registered for college as a religion major. Dinah registered as undecided. I poured myself into my studies. Dinah poured herself into witnessing for a religious sect that I had been warned to avoid. While I was cramming for Old Testament most evenings, Dinah and her pals were trying to convert me to their brand of Christianity.

I was frustrated by their efforts on a couple of levels. First of all, I had been taught that my salvation was secured—not by my own doing, but by God's grace—so I found their challenges more of an annoyance than a threat to my beliefs.

Second, while I truly believed that my salvation was secured, I wasn't so sure about my grades, especially my grade in Old Testament. (The phrase, "The Lord helps them that help themselves," kept coming to mind.) The reading assignments for Old Testament

were formidable. I had been warned by more advanced students that Old Testament was the “weed-out course” for religion majors, and I was not about to be weeded out.

Third, I experienced Dinah and her friends as rude. I naively thought we were all at college to study—not to party, not to find a marriage partner, and not even to get religion. I thought we were there to get a diploma. I couldn’t tell that she was focused on a diploma, and I didn’t appreciate her threatening my ability to obtain one.

In desperation one day, I said to Dinah and her friends, “I don’t know why you spend so much time and energy trying to convert me, when you say that only 144,000 are going to heaven. Aren’t you diminishing your chances of getting into heaven by trying to convert me?”

My point turned out to be a show-stopper that evening. After an unpleasant pause, Dinah and her friends collected themselves and headed out to a prayer meeting—no doubt to pray for me—which was a relief, since I was finally able to return to my studies.

Though my debate with Dinah came to a complete close when she dropped out of school at the end of our first year, my relationship with her was just a first salvo in my participation in the ongoing culture debates over heaven’s census and address.

#### IV

A more recent example of this wider debate in our culture is succinctly described in a folk song released by Susan Werner on her album titled *The Gospel Truth*. The first soundtrack on that album is called “Heaven So Small.” The lyrics go like this:

excuse me sir, what did you say?  
when you shout so loud, it's hard to tell  
you say that i must change my ways  
for i am surely bound to hell

well i know you'd damn me if you could  
but my friend, that's simply not your call  
if god is great and god is good  
why is your heaven so small

you say you know you say you've read  
that holy bible up on your shelf  
do you recall when jesus said  
judge not, lest ye be judged yourself

for i know you'd damn me if you could  
but my friend, that's simply not your call  
if god is great, and god is good  
why is your heaven so small

with your fists that shake, and your eyes that burn  
what makes you do these things you do?  
i would not be surprised to learn  
someone somewhere excluded you

but my friend, imagine it if you would  
a love much mightier than us all  
o if god is great and god is good  
why is your heaven  
so small<sup>1</sup>

V

Many of us are members and friends of Eden Church either because we grew up in traditions that believed in a very small heaven, located very far from this earthly plane, or because we have been battered by those who ascribe to such belief. Consequently, it would be easy for us to embrace Werner's number as our fight song in the culture wars, because it articulates so well the sense of alienation that many of us have felt *from* Christianity or *within* Christianity.

But, Werner and the gospel call us to a higher interpretation of her lyrics and the gospel message. Recall Werner's words, which echo Christ's message:

...imagine if you would  
a love much mightier than us all...

If we listen carefully to the words of Werner's song; if we wade through the historical and cultural context of Peter's conversion; and if we commit ourselves to following Christ's example, then we can resist the temptation to imagine a God who rejects those who reject us; we can imagine a very big heaven, right here on earth; we can experience heaven on earth, and we can invite others to join us in becoming residents of it.

Friends, believe the good news of the gospel. There is no limit to heaven's capacity. The door is open. This table is set. Come taste and believe that there's room for you. Come taste and believe that there is room for all. Come taste and believe that heaven is right here on earth. Amen.

---

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.susanwerner.com/music/m\\_tgt.html](http://www.susanwerner.com/music/m_tgt.html)