

Sermon for Zion, July 26, 2020

Hymns: 474 - The love of God comes close; 585 - Christ, you call us all to service;
Find Us Faithful

Scripture: Hebrews 13:1-3

Sermon Title: Lining Up in Heaven

Hebrews 13:1-3 - Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.

I was speaking with a friend a while ago who had been quite ill, to the point that she wondered whether she would live or die. In speaking with her about it – she has since, thank God, recovered – she said, “I was lying there in the hospital, wondering if I would die, and wondering if it mattered to many people whether I did or not.” And so I told her a dream I’d had.

In this dream, I had gone to heaven, and was given a tour (I wish I could say it was St. Peter, but I think I rated only a lower functionary. The dream was unclear). As we walked along, I kept seeing line-ups of people – some line-ups were short, with just a few souls, others longer, with dozens, while some stretched into the hundreds, thousands even. Those in the lineups were quite content to wait their turn, chatting with others in line.

“What’s with the lineups?” I asked.

My host replied, “When somebody new arrives, everyone whose lives they impacted lines up to tell them about it.”

“Impacted how?” I asked.

“Ask them yourself,” was the answer.

So I did. The first person I spoke with was close to the front of a line. They said, “I’m lined up to see my mum. My brothers and sisters are ahead of me.

Among other things, I want to tell her how she helped me treat other people with patience and understanding, just like she always treated me.”

I moved to another line. They said, “This is my grandma’s line. She brought me to Sunday School and to Church every Sunday of my childhood. She helped me learn about God’s love for me, and I never stopped going since.”

Another line: “My dad taught me to work hard and provide for others.”

Another: “My neighbour was always there for me; anytime I needed help, there they were.”

Another: “I worked with this guy. He never complained, and never spoke badly about anyone else, in all the years I knew him.”

Another: “This is my Grade 5 teacher. I was an awkward kid, and was always teased, picked on, but I knew somehow she cared about me, and her smiles and reassurances helped me not hate myself.”

Another: “Believe it or not, I’m lined up for this guy because we had a bad argument. A terrible fight. Horrible things were said.” Of course, I looked confused, and he smiled. “But then, after years of carrying this anger around like a rock in the pit of my soul, this guy phoned me, and asked to see me, and apologised for what he said, and asked if we could put it all behind us and start fresh, and I was so surprised I said sure, and that I was sorry too, and after 20 years of not talking, we got together regularly, and that friendship became an important part of who I am.” I looked ahead to the front of the line. “You know,” I said, “He kind of looks like you.” “Yes,” the man said. “He’s my son.”

Another: “After my husband died, I didn’t want to go anywhere or see anyone for weeks and months. But this lady kept calling, and inviting me for coffee, and inviting me for church, and eventually just to stop her phoning me I went, and I never stopped going, and I wasn’t so lonely anymore.”

Another: “This person I’m lined up for doesn’t even know me. They lived half a world away. But they made donations to feed the hungry, and their generosity saved my children from starvation. I am here to thank them. Someday my children will too.”

Another: And another: And another. Eventually, my guide encouraged me to talk to one of the newcomers for whom others were waiting to speak. “I had no idea,” she said, tears of happiness running down her cheeks. “No idea of how many people I touched, how many lives I impacted. This is so wonderful – I can’t wait to line up for others, and tell them how they made a difference to me.”

I returned to my guide. “This is so wonderful,” I said. “What a way to spend eternity! Telling the people in your life how they impacted yours, how they made a difference to you! So this is heaven.” But then I asked: “Is there a hell?”

My guide nodded, sadly.

“What happens there?” I asked.

“Same thing. Only very, very different.”

So I told my friend this dream. “My line would be short,” she said. But then together, we began to run through names, and faces, and memories, and as we did so, her line grew long, and longer still. And we talked about the people she’d line up for, too.

Who would be in your line? Whose life did you impact, and for the better? For whom would you line up? Who impacted you? How? In what way did they steer the course of your life? Of the decisions you’ve made? Of how you treat others? Of how you view the world? Of how you view yourself? Of the person you’ve become? It is something well worth thinking about, both sides of that coin. It is worth thinking about whether or not those lines are in balance; whether there are ways in which you might grow a longer line of your own.

How do we go about this? Well, start by thinking about who you would line up for - a person who impacted you, in a positive way, great or small. Maybe they changed your whole life; maybe just a small part. A good neighbour; a good friend; a loving parent; a supportive spouse; a teacher; a co-worker; that person who always made you feel welcome in church, and saved you a spot in a pew; maybe even a person whose name you don’t even know, but who said something or did something or lived in such a way that it made you, made your world, better, more

hopeful, more like you hoped life would be. In my dream, I dreamt that there were people who knew that someone helped them in a way that made a difference, but it was someone they'd never met, but whose kindness they never forgot. In heaven, they found out who that was. And joyfully joined their line.

When you think of who you'd line up for, and why, I think it would fill your heart with gratitude for the people that God has placed along your way, people who made an impact for you. Maybe you can learn from, be inspired by their example, and do for others what those people did for you. That's a pretty good way to grow a line.

As for the other side of that coin – why wait for heaven? Why not pick up the phone, or write a card, or send an email, or make an appropriate physically distanced visit, to someone you'd line up for? To thank them now? To tell them the difference they've made for you? I think if all of us did that, it would seem as though heaven starts not in the sweet bye and bye, but right now. And it might be the encouragement someone needs, someone who is thinking their life hasn't mattered much at all. You can be that difference. You can shine that light. Because their life mattered to you. And you told them so.

Jesus told a story. A parable. And I know you know it, and you've heard it, but I want you to hear it again, with what we've been talking about in mind. Jesus told it, and Matthew wrote it down, and here it is for us today (Matthew 25:31-46):

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see

you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

“The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’

“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’

“They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’

“He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’

“Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

The key point of this parable might surprise you. We often read it as though the main point is that some go to eternal punishment, but others to eternal life. But the clue to figuring out a parable’s main point is to look at what is emphasised through repetition. And in this parable, it is clear: when we treat others with kindness and compassion, it is as though we are being kind and compassionate to Jesus himself. And when we fail to provide for the hungry, the thirsty, the destitute; when we ignore the suffering of the sick and oppressed, it is as though we are ignoring not some anonymous stranger, but Jesus himself. We serve and love Jesus by serving and loving one another – most specifically those who are in need.

Back to my vision, my parable, my dream. The longest line, you will not be surprised to learn; the line stretching right around the block, if heaven can be said to have blocks; the line in which everyone in heaven eventually stands, joyfully waiting their turn, is the line to see Jesus. To say Thank-you. For all that Jesus has done, the things we realise now, and the things we don’t realise, but which we will come, in the light of eternity to learn; that’s the line we’ll wait in. To see him – to see Jesus - face to face.

But when we do, if the parable of the sheep and goats is anything to go by, we’ll be in for a surprise. We will realise that we’ve already seen him. That he was

in our line, waiting to see us; that we glimpsed Jesus in the faces of all those who were hungry and to whom we gave something to eat, who were thirsty and we gave something to drink, who were strangers and we invited in, who needed clothes and we clothed them, who were sick and we looked after them, who were in prison and we visited them.

That's who was in our line. In your line. It was Jesus. And we will say, "Thank you." And he will say, "You already have. In your kindness, and compassion, and generosity to others, you already have."

Thanks be to God. Amen.