

It seems as though about every 500 years, the church gets to re-think its understandings of the ways of God in the light of contemporary science and society. The last time was the Protestant Reformation. We are currently living in one of those pivotal times. Times when the old wine skins can no longer hold the new wine and things seem to fall apart. Times when we get to reformulate the way we talk about the ways of God and creation.

This morning, the gospel reading follows on from last week's parable about the rich man who had far more than he needed. But instead of sharing his wealth, he built storage units for all his stuff and was happy that he had more than he needed for retirement. But the night he got everything stored, he upped and died. So today's reading starts with the familiar idea that we shouldn't store up goods in this world but instead build up unfailing treasure in heaven.

And this is where we need to do some reformulating work. Where is heaven? And how do we build treasure in heaven? Obviously heaven is not in the sky above the clouds. We've been there and looked. Six years ago NASA launched a space robot called Juno which has now arrived at its target, Jupiter. Nowhere along the way did it spot heaven.

Of course we're not surprised, none of us really thought heaven was up there... but we often continue to behave as though we think we do.

If heaven is not part of this solar system, and in fact is not a place in the way we understand geography, then where or what is it? I would suggest that we think of heaven as a state of consciousness. We don't understand much about human consciousness or indeed about the consciousness of any sentient being but we know that there are different states, and we know from the experiences recounted by those who have died for all intents and purposes but then lived, that their consciousness continued on. We also know, from quantum physics and from anecdotal evidence that human consciousness can be very powerful.

So if heaven is a state of consciousness, how can we "Make purses for [ourselves] that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys."?

Too often, people think of the Christian faith as being about amassing brownie points in this life so we'll be rewarded in the next. But I don't think Jesus is talking about that at all. I don't think the "unfailing treasure in heaven" is future oriented. It seems to me that he's talking about a different way of thinking here and now.

Instead of amassing things and keeping them for ourselves in our closets and storage units, Jesus tells us to sell them and give money away. This is the reverse of our normal thought process. We are constantly encouraged by advertising to get more, do more, have more. Even when we don't have much money we go to yard sales, we see things that we like or that we could use and we buy them. When family members die it's hard to let go of things we associate with them, so we add those too. Soon we have far more than we need. But Jesus tells us to "Sell [our] possessions and give alms." In other words, to live generously. To live giving instead of keeping. To reverse the normal way of doing things.

And instead, to build heaven.

Let me remind you of the teaching story about the man who visits hell. And there he sees tables piled high with all kinds of wonderful food. But the people are emaciated and starving. The only way they can eat is with chopsticks which are longer than their arms, and try as they might, they cannot get the food to their mouths. Then he visits heaven. And he sees exactly the same thing – tables piled high with good food and chopsticks longer than the people's arms. But here the people are well fed and they're talking and laughing together. The difference is that here in heaven they are using the chopsticks to feed each other.

Those purses that don't wear out, that unfailing treasure in heaven is in our own minds, our own consciousness. Are we thinking first of our own comfort, or that of others? Is our attitude one of giving and forgiving? Or of taking and holding grudges? Are we building the reign of God in our own hearts and minds or are we giving in to the dominant culture?

Jesus tells us to wake up and be aware. "Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit." Don't get lulled into thinking that you're doing it, when actually you're not.

It requires constant diligence for us to remember that heaven is a state of consciousness and it's one which we are building now, not something that just happens miraculously after we die.

Fred Astaire sang,

Heaven, I'm in Heaven,
And my heart beats so that I can hardly speak;
And I seem to find the happiness I seek
When we're out together dancing, cheek to cheek.

Heaven is dancing with God in every moment.

Heaven is being filled with compassion for our own difficulties but not dwelling on them, heaven is choosing to respond with love and compassion to the situations and the people we meet. Heaven is living the beatitudes; living the way Jesus showed us.

It's so easy to lose consciousness – to forget that we are the children of God and we are called to be Christ-like. It's easy to slip back into the ways of the world around us. So Jesus reminds us to wake up and to stay awake; to remember who we are, because if we don't no-one else is going to. This is a huge challenge and it's one of the reasons we need each other; it's one of the reasons that we need faith community.

Because this is a lot more than trying to be a good person. This is practicing repentance and renewal every day. It's just not natural for us to live the life of self-sacrificing love that Jesus showed us. Every day we are going to fall short in some way; it takes constant practice. I think the Buddhists have a distinct advantage over most of us with their focus on practice. We too get to practice. We get to practice praising and worshiping God, and loving our neighbor as ourselves. We get to practice humility and a deep attitude of respect for all life.

And we get to do that as a community as well. The ancient Mothers and Fathers of the Desert taught "our life and our death is with our neighbor." We might say, "the kingdom of heaven is with our neighbor." We create heaven together as we learn to live in mutual respect and

compassion, seeing Christ in one another. We create heaven as we develop a new consciousness, one in which we see with God's eyes, and we see with love.

The writer and teacher, Marianne Williamson tells of how she was judging someone in her mind and complaining about him, when she heard God say, "Funny, I really like him."

Heaven is created every time we behave with the consciousness that God loves each of us with the same tenderness, so we let go of our own judgments and choose to see one another, and treat one another, with the love and respect due to God's beloved.

There's a wonderful song by Jamie O'Hara that Dolly Parton and Emmylou Harris sing; the words go like this:

And when we're walking together in glory
Hand in hand through eternity
It's the love that will be remembered
Not wealth, not poverty

And when we're gone, long gone
The only thing that will have mattered
Is the love that we've shared
And the way that we cared
When we're gone, long gone