

“Heaven Can Wait”

In the 1978 movie **“Heaven Can Wait”** Warren Beatty plays Joe Pendleton, a backup quarterback for the Los Angeles Rams football team. One day while riding his bicycle through a tunnel, he is hit by a truck. His guardian angel, not wanting him to suffer, takes his soul out of his body and takes him to heaven. Joe is glad he is in heaven but insists his time is not up. After an investigation, the officials in heaven determine Joe is correct. He was not to die until 2025.

The guardian angel has to figure out how to get Joe back to earth. A major problem is that his body has been cremated. Joe is placed in the body of Leo Farnworth, a millionaire industrialist who has just been drugged and drowned in a bathtub by his cheating wife (played by Dyan Cannon) and her boyfriend. Joe, now Leo Farnsworth, buys the Los Angeles Rams and works his body into shape. Along the way he meets Betty Logan (played by Julie Christie), an environmental activist who wants Farnworth’s company to clean up its act and stop polluting.

Joe works hard in Farnsworth’s body and is able to lead his team to the Super Bowl. In a close game, they become champions under his leadership. At the victory celebration, the guardian angel comes to Joe and tells him that as part of the switch he will no longer remember he was Joe Pendleton but will remember his victory and what he has learned on earth since he came back as Leo Farnsworth.

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Joe lives out the rest of his life with the joy of what he had done as a quarterback and also reforms his company and becomes more responsive to taking care of the environment.

I have pretty much thought about heaven since I can remember. My earliest memories are being in church and Sunday school. I have always enjoyed Bible stories, all the way from Noah to Moses to Jesus' miracles. I was glad to know the sacrifice that Jesus made for us so we could go to heaven.

But I have always wanted to live on earth and accomplish things here. Although I look forward to heaven and ultimately God's kingdom on earth, I came to an understanding early in my life that we need to serve other people while we live. We have been given gifts and abilities and we are to use them. We cannot just wait for the sweet, by and by.

My view of heaven and earth has much to do with the world view provided to me by my father, the Rev. Wallace Culp, Jr. Daddy emphasized the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the salvation provided to us by Jesus dying on the cross. But he did not say too much about the streets of gold and the mansions in heaven. His words and his actions taught me and my brothers and those in his congregations how to live with others on earth.

So, in many ways Daddy gave me a lesson in what we read about today in Matthew 25:14-30. This is the so-called parable of the talents, part of Jesus' final discourse to his disciples before he is arrested and then crucified. A master goes on a long journey. It is unclear how long he will be gone. He entrusts his property to his servants. To one he gave five talents, to one he gave two talents, and to another he gave one talent. While he was gone, the one with five talents worked with what he had been given and made five more talents. The one with two talents invested what he had been given, worked with it and made two more talents. But the one with one talent went off and dug a hole and put his money in it. He did nothing with what he was given.

A talent was a large sum of money, equal to the wages of day laborers for fifteen years. In the Middle Ages, because of this story, the talent came into the English language as a term for God-given abilities. We often hear the term gifts and graces. This parable is an origin of that term.

Matthew uses this story as an allegory of the Parousia. The Parousia is the term for the triumphant return of Jesus Christ at the second coming. Like the master who left on a long journey, Jesus left earth after his resurrection and ascension and will return at some point. We do not know when. Matthew uses the

story today to fill in the nature of the Christian life while waiting for the Parousia.

What are we to do as we wait?

As I have grown up (in my view we are always growing, no matter how old we are), I have wondered about those who seem to focus only on heaven. The Christians in my life who focused only on the pearly gates, whether they would get a mansion or a ranch house for eternity, and thought only about the sweet by-and-by, failed to take any real responsibility for this messy world. They were looking up when they should be looking down. They were looking for God to provide and be generous to them instead of looking at what they could provide for others while on earth. They were comfortably waiting for death, enduring life's inconveniences, checking their tongues at the immoral and improper and half-heartedly uttering, "Well isn't that a shame," before getting back to their easy existences. They were not using their talents to do anything constructive.

You might think I am being harsh on certain people, but think about what the master does in this parable. The master gives no instructions as to what is to be done with the talents, so faithfulness is not merely obedience to directions. Each servant must decide how to use this time during the master's absence. The pictures presented by Matthew in his gospel speak of the reality of the judgement and the necessity for decisive and responsible action.

And the servant with one talent fails miserably. Think about it; he dug a hole and put the money in it. As the master points out, he could have at least put the money in the bank and got some interest. But he didn't even do that. He clearly has not been faithful. The master refers to him as wicked and lazy. At the end of the story, he is thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

It may seem harsh that this happens to this servant, but the reality is that he created his own problem. He was lazy and did nothing; because of his fear, he failed to accomplish his master's will. As I have preached before, Christians cannot just wait for Jesus to return, live the life of ease, and do nothing.

The parable teaches us that we are to use our talents and gifts to do work on earth. The two other servants who doubled their money are told by their master that that they had done well and they were trustworthy. They are rewarded.

I remember how my father taught me to take reasonable risks. He supported the decisions I made. When I chose to attend Oral Roberts University, he could have told me not to go. He could have said that it was just too out of the ordinary. But he knew it was critical to my spiritual development. Although he was not around when I later was called into the ministry, his decision to let me chart my own course showed his wisdom.

Daddy also encouraged me to evolve in my thinking. He gave me good moral grounding, but he always wanted me to examine my beliefs and my conclusions. This has proved valuable in my approach to ministry.

Both of my parents emphasized that we use our talents. I knew from the time that I entered first grade that I was expected to go to college and get a degree. I was not told where to attend but I knew I was to get an education. My training would help me be a servant on earth.

Most importantly, my father taught me to meet people where they were. Several years ago, while at the graveside service for Roger Burnett in Greenwood, I spoke with the funeral home director. He knew my father and commented that he was a person who could sit with a college president at a banquet and the next day minister to an alcoholic down on his luck. He had it right. I remember how Daddy loved to hang out and drink coffee at the local Waffle House in Greenwood. He made friends there, counselled people there and was a fixture. He eventually performed a wedding service at the Waffle House between two people who were not comfortable within the walls of traditional churches. I learned we use our talents to help those from any avenue of life.

I have come to conclude, though, that we still need to look towards heaven and the coming kingdom of God on earth while we do our earthly work. There is a

balance between how much we focus on heaven and how much we focus on earth.

The problem with the servant with one talent was not that he looked only towards heaven. The problem was that he was lazy and did nothing.

I learned much about how to handle life when my father died when I was only 33 years old. It was the first time I suffered a grief I knew could not heal in the short span of my lifetime. Nothing I could ever do would bring Daddy back. I thought more about heaven and seeing Daddy once again when I got there. I realized more why survivors look forward to seeing their spouses, their parents, their children, when they get to heaven.

I knew that my work on earth still continued. I knew it would not be easy. I still had a journey to take. Rev. Libby Howe, of the Wisconsin Area Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, writes of the songs for our journey, the 15 psalms commonly known as the psalms of ascent (120-134). These ancient songs were first sung by God's people as they traveled long roads to the temple of Jerusalem during communal feasts and personal pilgrimages. They express the sojourner's unwavering hope in God's presence, provision and power amid all of life's sufferings. In every psalm of ascent, you will find the certainty of an external heavenly destination rooted in the difficulty of temporal earthly experiences.

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Rev. Howe sums up Psalm 123 as follows: “Our feet walk on the earth, but our eyes look up to heaven---trusting that you, God, provide all we need. And what we need is mercy---relief---because we’re fed up with people abusing us.” In 2020, we need heaven and its songs even more. We could choose not to hear the songs of the psalmist. But that would be unwise. All of us need the psalms of ascent. They are freedom songs for the ages, the spirituals of the psalter. Yes, heaven can wait while we do God’s work on earth. But, when there is no end in sight, the psalms give us a destination, a city called heaven where we can shout all over. When all the helpers are tired and worn out, they remind us there is a balm in Gilead. And when it’s all too much and we can’t go on, these songs give us a land that is fairer than day where we will meet on the beautiful shore.