

SO HEAVENLY MINDED THAT WE ARE EARTHLY GOOD

Sermon, April 24, 2016

Texts: Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35

It was Oliver Wendell Holmes who was credited with saying, *"Some people are so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good."* So heavenly minded that we are no earthly good? Pardon my French, but au contraire! I believe the truth is the more heavenly minded we become, the more earthly good we are! In fact, I would say history has objectively shown that the most heavenly minded people usually are the ones who do a lot of earthly good.

C.S. Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity*: *"If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. The apostles themselves, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English Evangelicals who abolished the slave trade, all left their mark on Earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with Heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at Heaven and you will get earth 'thrown in': aim at earth and you will get neither."*

Also, these words from John Piper: *"Yes, I know it is possible to be so heavenly minded that we are of no earthly use. My problem is: I've never met one of those people. And I suspect, if I met one, the problem would not be that his mind is full of the glories of heaven, but that his mouth is full of platitudes."*

C.S. Lewis called Heaven *"... that remote music we are born remembering."* We instinctively know about heaven, we even yearn for it. On the other hand, however, we don't know much about it. It's humbling to preach about heaven. I've never been there ... but I fully believe I have seen fleeting glimpses of it in my lifetime. Much of what the Bible says about heaven is difficult to understand, it is written in the highly figurative style of "apocalyptic" literature which makes extensive use of imagery. I believe one reason for that is God is trying to communicate something to us which cannot be described in the normal categories of life; He is trying to express the inexpressible. Our understanding is limited to our own human, earthly experience; we have no common reference point. As mentioned in the children's sermon, I have a deaf sister. She has been deaf from three months of age, and has never been able to hear anything; she has never heard music. I was thinking of this last night during our *(well-attended!)* Hymn Sing ... so many wonderful memories were sparked by the singing of those grand hymns, but my sister has no such musically-triggered memories because she has never heard music! But I can tell you this: she believes in sound! She believes in music! She has seen others respond to sound, she knows sound is real, she has seen how sound moves people, she is even one of my favorite dance partners because she has learned so well how to imitate the moves of others on the dance floor and to follow the partner's lead even though she can't hear the music or "feel" the beat unless the bass is turned WAY up. But I just can't describe sound to her in terms she'd understand, let alone describe for her the wonder and beauty of music! She doesn't have the human experience, the common reference point, to enable her to really understand what I'm trying to communicate. In like manner, God is limited to imagery and symbols drawn from our finite, human, temporal experience when speaking of the infinite, divine eternal glories of heaven. We may be incapable of fully understanding what the Bible is saying about heaven, but there are "parallels" of heaven in our experience that we can appreciate and understand in part.

For an example I've noted before from this pulpit, John sees in his vision of heaven that *"... there was no longer any sea."* What's that about? Well, two things: First, the sea was a literary symbol of threat and destruction for the Hebrews. The Jewish people were not advanced in seafaring, but their enemies were ... and they often came to attack Israel from the sea. Also, devastating winds that would destroy crops, violent storms that would threaten their welfare and property, all would come in off the Mediterranean Sea. So, the sea was a symbol of threat, death and destruction. Second, for John the sea was a source of isolation, it was a barrier of separation. As mentioned last week, he was exiled on the island of Patmos in the Aegean when he received this vision; he was separated from those he loved by the sea. John is telling us the new reality for which all the saints are destined is one in which all threat, destruction, all separation from our loved ones, will be no more! We will be safe, secure, together, and God Himself will be there in the midst of His people, and *"...He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away."* When God wipes away tears, it is the end of tears. All those things that cause us tears in this life will be no more. There will be no more crying, no more disease, no more separation from those we have loved and lost, no more death, no more pain, no more disappointment. All that is wrapped up in that enigmatic phrase *"... there was no longer any sea."* Barring a miracle in this lifetime, I believe the very first sounds my sister will hear will be her Lord saying to her, *"Well done, good and faithful servant."*

Remember that Revelation was written for very real people who were facing, or who were about to face, tremendous trouble, tremendous pain, tremendous suffering. The vision of Revelation was written to foster the hope, inspiration, strength and grace that comes from being genuinely heavenly minded.

Last week I cited some statistics from the excellent little book The Rise of Christianity by Ronald Stark. Stark was a sociologist and something of an historian asking, "How did a tiny and obscure messianic movement from the edge of the Roman empire dislodge classical paganism and become the dominant faith of Western civilization? Why did Christianity succeed in the Roman empire?" Why was it in particular that in a hundred year period Christianity went from about six percent to almost fifty percent of the entire Roman Empire? Why did it grow like that? Stark cites a number of reasons, but one reason among many that he goes into in great detail is that there were two great plagues in the Roman Empire in the first couple of centuries after Christ. In 165 AD, during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, an epidemic struck, and during the course of the next fifteen years it killed up to a third of the total population of the empire, including the emperor himself (165, you may remember, was also the year Polycarp and Justin Martyr were martyred). In 251 AD a similar epidemic struck again, and with similar results, and it also lasted about fifteen years. We don't know exactly what the epidemics were; historians have speculated from the records that one plague might have been smallpox and the other might have even been measles, but what we do know is that these plagues were absolutely devastating, particularly in the cities. At the height of the second plague some 5,000 a day, 35,000 a week, were dying in Rome, back in the days when the city of Rome itself couldn't have been more than about a million people (which is roughly the population of our state ... imagine losing 35,000 people a week in Rhode Island!).

In both cases, up to a third of the population of the empire was wiped out during these plagues. The people didn't have any idea how to cure these illnesses, but they did know one thing ... they knew these diseases were spread through contact. As a result, the rich ... and, interestingly enough, the doctors ... got out of cities. They fled the cities! There are also a number of accounts that when a family member would get very sick, the families would just abandon the family member. They left one another, they left the sick in droves, they fled the cities in droves ... but not the Christians! For the most part the Christians stayed put in the cities, and not only did they love, nurture and take care of their own sick, but they organized compassionate nursing services and they went out and brought in and cared for all sorts of the pagan sick who had been abandoned by their families and friends. Now, many of the Christians did die; we have reports about this. But why the difference? Why did the Christians stay? In short, they stayed because THEY WERE HEAVENLY MINDED. And they worshipped a God who did not abandon this suffering world, but personally entered into the pain and suffering of this world to redeem it. They knew that God took on a body to enter this life to make it whole, thus demonstrating that human life is worthy of saving. Pagans had no assurance about an afterlife, no assurance of any kind of salvation. Christians knew that this world, as wonderful as it can be, is just a prelude for something greater. They knew that death would do nothing but translate them into glory. The Christians' heavenly mindedness helped them to stay put out of love and concern for their stricken loved ones, AND for their stricken neighbors.

Rodney Stark writes about one of the Roman doctors, by the name of Galen, who documented the first plague ... a lot of Galen's writings survive. Galen was one of those doctors who fled the city. He didn't treat anyone because he knew if he did so he ran the risk of getting sick himself. Stark writes, "Galen lacked belief in life beyond death while Christians were certain that this life is only a prelude. For Galen to have remained in Rome to treat the afflicted would have required bravery far beyond that which was needed by Christians to do the same thing." The Christians were heavenly minded, and being "heavenly minded" gave these otherwise very ordinary people a purpose, a reason, a strength and a hope for staying put and doing tremendous earthly good. Stark also points out that "... modern medical experts believe that conscientious nursing alone without any medication could cut the mortality rate by two-thirds or even more." If the sick were just taken care of, if they were cleansed and fed and nurtured and just cared for, two thirds of them would go on to recover. When the sick were abandoned, however, the death rate was *much* greater.

Therefore, since Christians did not abandon each other because they loved each other as Jesus loved them, and because they weren't afraid because they were so heavenly minded, two things resulted: the Christians' death rate was up to two thirds' less than the pagans, and their subsequent biological growth rate would have grown two to three times the population of the plague-decimated pagans. But more than that, thousands of these pagans had heavenly minded Christians to thank for their lives. To carry the metaphor of my sister, they may have been deaf to spiritual things, but they witnessed the reality of the spiritual in how the spiritual moved these heavenly minded Christians to do tremendous earthly good. So we have this historically documented rapid upsurge in the growth of Christianity, both biologically and through conversions. Though many Christians did die, there was tremendous success and growth in the church during this time.

The Christians didn't do all this because they were trying to take over the empire, they did it because Heaven was real to them and they lived accordingly. And they were loving each other as Jesus loved them. Being heavenly minded made them tremendously earthly good. The knowledge of heaven made them healers, it made them heroes ... because being heavenly minded gives hope, it gives purpose, it gives strength and it gives us reason to go on to do tremendous earthly good in this world while we are here.