

**MEDITATION; ALL SAINTS COMMUNION; HEBREWS 9:11-14; NOVEMBER 1, 2015; THOMAS H. YORTY; GRATITUDE IN ACTION: COMMUNITY; WPC**

On All Saints Sunday, I think of Dante Alighieri the great Italian poet who, in his *Divine Comedy*, gave the world the best sermon ever preached on heaven.

Dante's epic takes him from his 14<sup>th</sup> century Tuscan world to the tenth sphere of heaven where the saints reside for eternity in the presence of God.

His reader is ushered through the darkest regions of Hell to the shifting light of Purgatory and finally into the Empyrean bliss. For Dante, the highest sphere of heaven lay like an outermost skin over the physical world. And while we live in an age of black holes and Hubble telescopes that make his ascending spheres of heaven seem ordinary, his age had a greater capacity for mystery and likely elicited a deeper sense of wonder and awe at the magnificence of the created order.

I start with a poet to talk about heaven because theologians are more concerned with doctrinal infrastructure but artists like Dante and Dan Forrest, composer of today's Requiem, bring color and imagination to the possibilities of afterlife.

Our national poet laureate Charles Wright, for example, raises an interesting question about how to find heaven. In his *Zone Journal* poems he remembers the birth and death dates of his muses: Paul Cezanne, John Keats, and Ezra Pound and in a poem titled, "A Traveler between life and death" Wright wonders where do we draw the line between this world and the next? Where do they meet? Where is the synapse between mortality and eternity? The common ground, where one gives way to the other?

His answer is that heaven is to be found where "That line like a wind over water/Rippling toward shore,/appears and disappears/In wind-rise and wind-falter--/That line between rain and sleet,/between leaf-bronze and leaf-drop--/That line where the river stops and the sea begins,/Where the black blackens/and light comes out of light..."

Dan Forrest asks the same question in his choral work today and, like Wright, he blurs the line, suggests perhaps a dotted line separating this world and the next.

The title of his work says as much: "Requiem for the Living"; in five movements he takes us from the struggles and joys of this life – and joins them to the saints in heaven who know a life more full and complete than ours.

All great art is the old made new; the idea of merging of earth and heaven, a dotted line between, goes back to Augustine and continues through Aquinas, Calvin, and Edwards. ***What fascinated them was the continuation of relationships in this world to the next.*** Mark Twain even gets into the act saying in *Huckleberry Finn* that surely if there is a heaven it must be a bigger one than that of Huck's Aunt, Mrs. Phelps, whose view of the afterlife was no more than "a mean little ten-cent heaven about the size of Rhode Island."

While as many as 81% of us, according to a recent poll, believe in some form of life after death, we spend precious little time talking about it in church – or more specifically, preachers spend very few words on the subject. When asked about it most people are circumspect and content with, “I haven’t the foggiest idea.”

This is unfortunate because given the porous nature of reality – the reality we can see and the reality we otherwise receive glimpses of or voices from or summons to of one kind or another – given the robust interconnection between this world and the one that is our final destination, it makes good sense to contemplate, at least once each year, a created order bigger than our senses can perceive or a powerful telescope in low-earth orbit can measure.

The benefit of days such as this, remembering the trajectory of creation, is that it allows us to realign our operating view of life with the biblical vision; to connect the dots of human existence with the fullness of God’s purposes and thus live with deeper expectation and awe and confidence.

Paul Tillich said the categories we use to talk about such things are not measurable by time and space; yet it does make sense, he agrees, to talk of heaven in earthly terms, if we remember our metaphors are placeholders for something much greater.

The reason Dante’s heaven is revered above all others is the synthesis he makes of a God-centered afterlife set in terms of human community. Marilynne Robinson’s preacher in *Gilead* does the same thing; he said heaven is a world much like this one only twice as good; “I’d multiply by ten or twelve and not just two,” he says from his deathbed to his old confidant “but two is much more sufficient for my purposes.” His friend looks at him, pleased, “sitting there multiplying the feel of the wind by two, the smell of the grass by two, the practical jokes he played as a boy....the stars were brighter in those days,” the dying man says. “Twice as bright,” his friend replies.

We are, on our best days, in our best moments, living the life of heaven, the life our loved ones we name today are living every moment of every immeasurable era of eternity. It is this principle of the fullness of life, the *Westminster Confession* had in mind when it says, “The chief end of humans is to serve God and *enjoy Him forever.*”

What you will hear from Sawrie Becker in a moment is a story that recognizes a larger reality, a bigger world than the one we can see and touch; it is a world where life is stronger than death and love never dies.

Most of us could tell that story. Just two weeks ago when Carol and I went to Cincinnati to perform the graveside service for our niece’s four-month old son, our grand nephew; *you* were with us; we felt *your prayers, your loving embrace* and we were able to affirm again that life does not end with death.

So let the music blur the line for you today between here and there; let the story Sawrie tells merge the best of this world with the world to come; and let your actions, every one of them, be a sign of gratitude for the living God who stands by us in this life and welcomes us home when our days here are ended. Amen.