

“Heaven is Other People”

Rev. Mark Lewis

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St. Paul’s, Hamilton

Every once in a while, we all get into a situation where we think someone else has behaved very poorly or has acted disrespectfully, and we let out a big sigh, roll our eyes, and say, “Hell is other people!” I know you’re laughing, and you’re thinking of the last time that you thought that, so you should know the origin of that term.

It comes from a play written in 1943 by the French existentialist philosopher Jean Paul Sartre. The play was called “No Exit,” and it tells the story of a man who dies and goes to hell, but there is no fire, no pitchforks and no physical torture, it’s just an ordinary living room. But there are other people there, and they are annoying, interfering, judgemental, nosy and unintelligent...and there is no way out of the room, so the character in the play cries out, “Hell is other people!”

And, of course, by extension, hell is this life when you have to deal with annoying people! If you are nodding your head in agreement, you may need to get some help with your attitude, and you might need to reassess your view of the world.

We might find some good in this time of isolation, and one of the good things we might find is that we actually like other people. Even the crankiest person among us likes the company of others. There are family members whom we miss. Parents and children who can’t see each other; Grandparents and grandkids who have to be apart; people having to visit a loved one in hospital by waving at them through a window; all of you are now separated from someone whom you would dearly love to see. We are separated from our friends and we miss them. We even miss those small daily human interactions with the clerks in our favorite stores, our barista, and our hair dresser or barber. On this Mother’s Day, many mom’s will not be able to see their children at all due to travel restriction, and others will have to make do with a visit in the driveway. In this time of isolation, we have learned that, in spite of all our complaints, we like other people; we love other people. We are at our best when we live in healthy community.

That may be why Jesus often tells us that heaven is other people. In many places, Jesus speaks of heaven as the reunion with our loved ones, communion with our friends, and living in good community with people whom we love. Heaven is other people.

The Scripture reading for today is [John 14:1-14](#), the beautiful verses in which Jesus assures his disciples that even though he has to leave them, one day he will return and bring them to where he is going. I want to look at one verse in particular, [John 14:2](#), “In my Father’s house there are many mansions: if it were not so I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for

you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.”

You will notice firstly that I am reading from the King James Version, which is strange for me. I normally read from a more modern translation because I generally value clarity and understandability above the poetic perfection of the King James Version. But in this case, the language of the King James Version might have an edge over more modern versions, particularly with the use of the term “mansion.” It has been removed from the modern versions because modern translators feel that it is illogical to think that many mansions could fit inside a house, it just doesn’t make sense. Most translations say, “In my Father’s house there are many rooms, or many dwelling places.” Those translations make more sense but they lack a sense of the grandness and lavishness of heaven. Not that you should think of heaven in terms of living in a mansion. Those are just earthly words struggling to convey the immeasurable wonder of salvation.

Let me tell you about the houses in which Jesus’ community lived and then you will see why the word “mansion” might fit, and why Jesus describes heaven as other people. Jesus’ disciples mostly came from three small villages at the northern end of the Sea of Galilee, Capernaum, Bethsaida, and Chorazin. In those villages it would be typical for a man to build a house of stone that was perhaps three meters by four meters with a courtyard out front, and perhaps some usable space on the roof. When it was time for one of his sons to get married, the young man would build a house on the side of his father’s house. Other sons would also build houses attached to the father’s house, or attached to the previous son’s house. Eventually the family would have constructed a horseshoe of houses, all attached, and all around a central courtyard. The whole structure was referred to as the “insula.” All of the generations, grandparents, parents and children would live their lives in community. Jesus’ disciples grew up in small towns that were a series of insulas all connected together. When someone referred to the house of a particular father, they would use the word “**οἶκος**” meaning household, and it referred to the main house and all the houses of the sons and grandsons attached to it. The houses attached to the father’s house were referred to as “**μοῦναι**” which means “a place of residence.” So, when Jesus said, “In my Father’s house there are many mansions.” He was using imagery that was familiar to his disciples, and he was telling them that in heaven they would live in harmonious community, all of them connected to the Father’s household. Heaven is other people, and in particular, living in community and good relationship with other people.

I know that for many people family relationships have been destructive and hurtful, and the idea of living in close proximity with family would actually be more like hell than heaven. Not every piece of Biblical imagery can be stretched to its end or applied universally. For those whose family memories are painful, I ask you imagine living in community with all the people who love you the best, support you loyally, and respect you for who you are. Heaven is *those* people! They are your true family.

In John 14:3, after the verse about the mansions, Jesus says, “I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto myself; that

where I am, there ye may be also.” This verse is also taken from the family life of Jesus’ community in Galilee. When a man wanted to marry a woman, they would participate in various courting rituals, and then, if they wanted to proceed, the man would hand the woman a cup of wine and say, “This cup is the new covenant.” If the woman accepted the cup and drank from it, it was an indication that she accepted his proposal. But they could not be married yet because they had no place to live. The man would say, “I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.” He would then return to his father’s household to build a new house where he and his wife could live. When the new house was completed, the marriage could take place and the man could bring the woman unto himself. Jesus’ disciples all understood the concept of going to prepare a place. And I am sure you recognize the verse, “This cup is the new covenant,” from our liturgy for Holy Communion.

When Jesus’ disciples were the most afraid, when they knew that he was going to leave them, and their hearts were broken, he used the image of a loving family to assure them that they were his family, that he loved them forever and that they would live together in good community in heaven. Jesus understood that living in good and loving relationships with other people was the closest thing to heaven that we would ever see on earth. Heaven is other people.

During this pandemic we have learned that lesson all over again. The things that we miss in our time of isolation are not material things, but relationships. We miss having a coffee with our neighbour. We miss having lunch with a friend whose company we treasure. We miss all the family connections that now must be practiced at a distance. We miss being in casual contact with ordinary people as we go about our daily errands. We miss people, because heaven is other people.

I pray that when this pandemic is over, you will hold onto the knowledge that heaven is other people. I pray that you will reassess your priorities, deemphasise the material things in your life and put new emphasis on building and maintaining good relationships. Heaven is other people. Joy, wholeness and fulfillment come from living in good community.

I also pray this, that you will understand that a whole lot of people in this world do not have any relationships. There are people all around you who do not have any people. Some of them are older people whose families do not have time to see them, or maybe they never had any family and have outlived their friends. Some are people whose relationships have broken down, and they do not have the skills or energy to build new relationships. Some are children whose parents just don’t have time for them. Some are homeless people who can stand right beside you on the sidewalk and yet be invisible. Some are refugees who have been deprived of home and family. Some are people who are excluded from their own family on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity. The world is filled with people who have no people.

I want you to find ways in your personal life to include some more people in your circle of friend. Make them your family. Be like Jesus in today’s call to worship in which Jesus wanted to include everyone like a mother hen gathering her chicks under her wings. And let’s

remember that one of the things that the church does best is to create community. How can we expand our community and include more people in our family?

Jean Paul Sartre may have said that hell is other people, but we know that a loving community is priceless; good relationships bring joy and healing; heaven is other people.