

## “Anticipate Your Heaven”

**Date:** April 8, 2018 **Place:** Lakewood UMC **Occasion:** Disciple’s Heart, series **Texts:** 1 Corinthians 13:8-13; Revelation 1:1-8 **Theme:** Heaven, persistence, hope

While mountain climbing in the Swiss Alps in the summer of 1941, 20-year old Robert Matthias Barth tragically fell to his death. Four days later, his father, renowned theologian Karl Barth preached in the memorial service. A theological giant became a broken-hearted parent.

In his message, Barth focused the congregation’s attention on the words *now* and *then* in 1 Corinthians 13: “For *now* we see in a mirror dimly, but *then* we will see face to face. *Now* I know only in part; *then* I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And *now* faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.” (1 Cor. 13:12-13, NRSV)

Next, speaking of his son’s death, he said: “We stand with Christ where the border of *Now* and *Then* touch each other.” My friends, as we come to the conclusion of our series *A Disciple’s Heart*, I want you to know this: “The border between *Now* and *Then* is where we live out the journey toward Christian perfection.

In the *Now*, we acknowledge we are not yet the persons we will be. *Then* is when God’s saving grace has been completed in our lives and in our world. We live in the reality that God’s active reign is present to us *now*, to the full degree that we live within it. At the same time, we look with confidence to the way in which God’s rule will be completed, when God’s saving purpose is fulfilled in this creation.

We live at the border of *Now* and *Then*. We are not yet all that God has in store for us to be, but we press on. It says in Hebrews 6:1, “Let us go

on to perfection.” Or, as another translation puts it, “Let us press on to maturity.” (CEB) Ooo, I like that one even better. Let us go on to *maturity*. My friends, the way of salvation is not a one-time event, but an ongoing process of heart transformation.

It is a process that begins even before we make our first commitment to Christ, and it continues throughout our life’s journey, all the way to heaven. The New Testament images of heaven are not given to provide information about the hereafter, but to give us orientation. They are imaginative visions by which we set the direction of our lives – the goal toward which we are moving.

Our vision of what life is like in heaven determines the way we live right now. Because followers of Christ have caught a vision of the way things will be when God’s kingdom comes and God’s will is done on earth as it is in heaven, we are driven by a divine dissatisfaction with the way things are.

We live in the *Now* but we yearn for *Then*. As disciples who are on the way to heaven, we experience a divine dissatisfaction with the way the world is now – with all of its violence, bigotry, racism, poverty, pain and death. Our hearts are on fire with a passion for this world to become all that God intends it to be.

And so we live our lives *Now* in ways that are consistent with what we believe it will be like *Then*. The late Robert Kennedy captured this thought in his much quoted line, “Some men see things as they are and say *why*. I dream things that never were and say *why not*.”

What if we looked at heaven not as a destination but as our orientation? What if we took seriously the Lord’s Prayer when we say the words, “Thy will be done, *on earth* as it is in heaven.”?

In our opening hymn this morning, we sang these words, written by Charles Wesley: “In Christ, your head, you then shall know/ Shall feel your sins forgiven/ *Anticipate* your heaven below/ And own that love is heaven.” This is where today’s sermon title came from. To *anticipate* something is to feel or realize something before it happens.

“Anticipate your heaven” means living *Now* the way we believe the world will be **Then**. It means shaping our lives in this world in ways that are consistent with the way the world will be when God’s kingdom comes and God’s will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

In other words, heaven is the fulfillment of everything we are already becoming. It is the end toward which all things are moving. Heaven is the consummation of God’s work of salvation for the whole creation, the final fulfillment of our growth towards perfection. Anticipating heaven means that

- We care about this earth *Now* because *Then* the renewed creation will be the place where God will be at home with God’s people.
- We work for peace *Now* because we know that *Then* swords will be turned into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks and people will not learn war any more.
- We work to heal racial and ethnic division *Now* because we know that *Then* heaven will be filled with people from every race, tongue and nation.
- We invite others to become disciples of Jesus Christ *Now* because we know that *Then* every knee will bow and every tongue confess Jesus Christ is Lord.
- We care for one another in Christian love *Now* because we know that *Then* God will wipe away every tear from our eyes.

- We feed the hungry, heal the sick, clothe the naked, visit the prisoners and seek economic justice for the poor *Now* because Jesus said this is the way that every nation will be judged *Then*.

In calling us to “own that love is heaven,” Charles Wesley’s hymn takes us back to the heart of the matter, which is always a matter of the heart. The heaven toward which the journey of Christian maturity is taking us is nothing less than the completion of God’s work of love in us and in the whole of creation.

William Willimon, retired United Methodist bishop, says that life on this side of the resurrection is a “long choir rehearsal for heaven.” Life on this side of death is a choir rehearsal for heaven. The way we live, think, and act now is the way we tune our souls to the music of God’s redemptive purpose that will ultimately be fulfilled through the risen Christ.

In other words, our sense of what life is like beyond death determines the way we live right now. The goal of the holy life is not to escape earth, but to play our part in God’s redemption of it. People who see themselves as “holy partners with God” are never satisfied with this world the way it is.

Rather, they are always investing themselves in the way God intends for this world to become. They see all of life as a choir rehearsal for heaven. They live on the border of *Now* and *Then*. They anticipate their heaven. And no matter how long the journey, no matter how hard the path, they keep pressing on.

Oh, we always have the choice of stopping somewhere along the journey of discipleship. We could decide that this is as far as we are willing to go toward being perfected in love. OR, by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, we can keep reaching out to what lies ahead, and continue following Christ in a long obedience in the same direction.

Galatians 6:9 encourages us, “Let us not grow weary in doing good.” 2 Thessalonians echoes that hope: “Be not weary in well-doing.” And 1 Corinthians 13:12 offers us this hope: “Now we see a reflection in a mirror; then we will see face to face. Now I know partially; but then I will know completely in the same way that I have been completely known.”

We end this study and this sermon series with the invitation to stay on the journey of Christian maturity that will be fulfilled in heaven. Along the way, we join Wesleyan disciples in singing our Song of Ascent:

“Finish, then, thy new creation;  
Pure and spotless let us be.  
Let us see thy great salvation  
Perfectly restored in thee;  
Changed from glory into glory,  
Till in heaven we take our place,  
Till we cast our crowns before thee,  
Lost in wonder, love and praise.” (Love Divine, All Loves Excelling)

Let us pray:

“Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, I pray that I might anticipate heaven *Now* as I await your completion of love in me and in the whole creation *Then*. Until then, may I love my family, friends and enemies in the way of Jesus of Nazareth. Amen.”

This sermon borrows heavily from the daily workbook *A Disciple's Heart: Growing in Love and Grace*, by James A. Harnish with Justin Larosa. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015, pp. 99-114; and the companion book by the same title and authors, pp. 61-70.